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THE NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW

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June 1982

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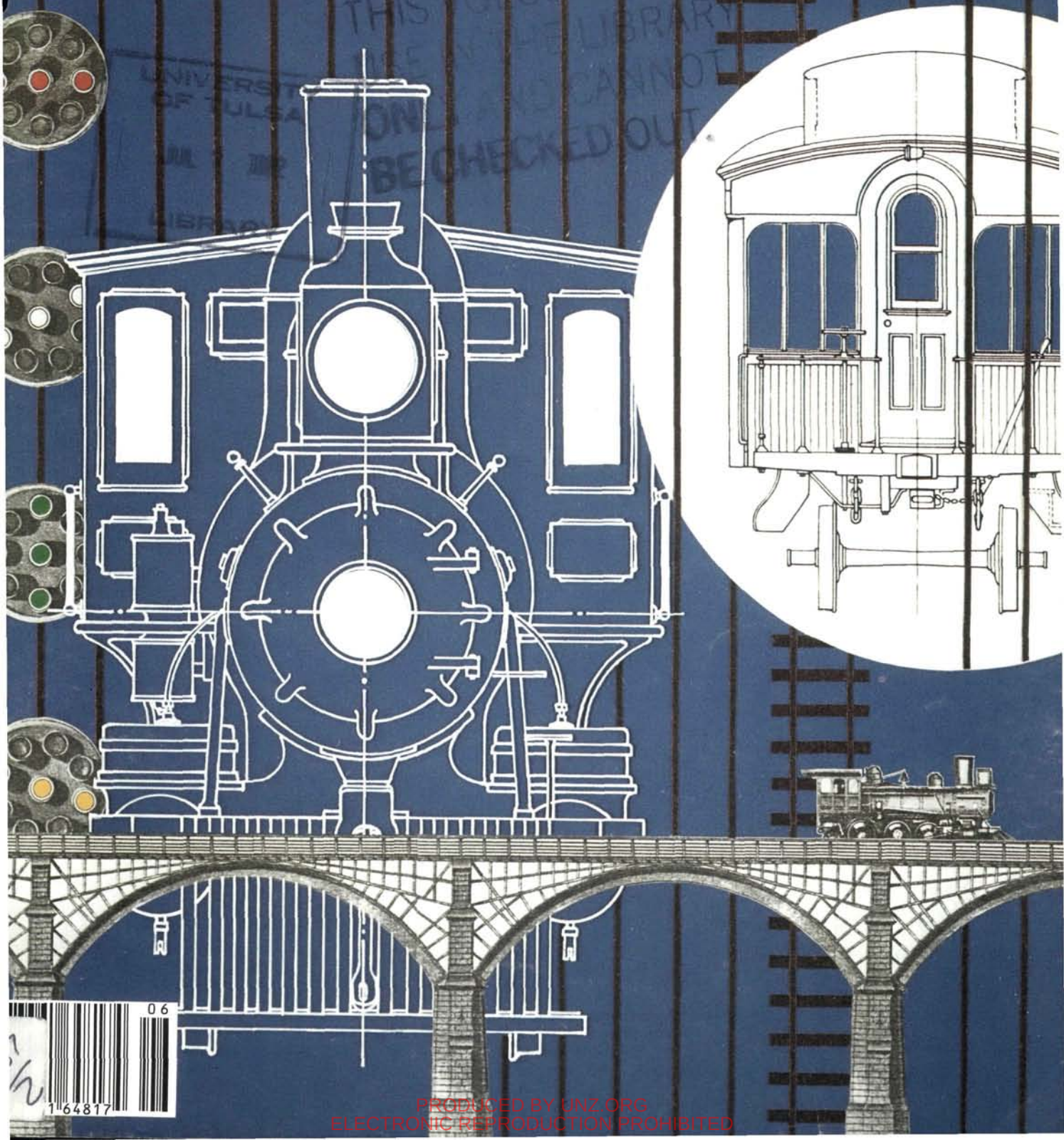

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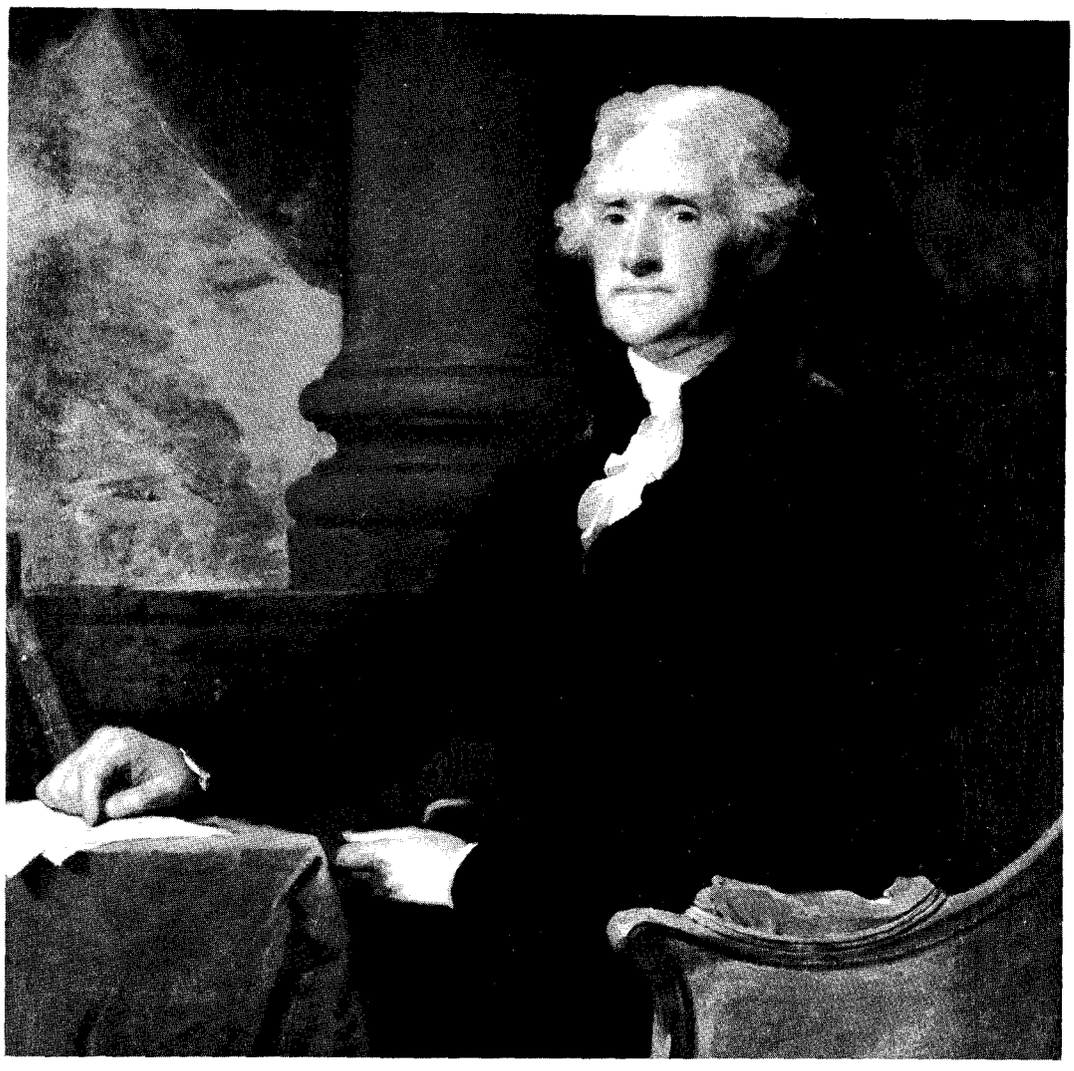

Sir Monticello Mar. 27. 25.

I am a subscriber to the N. American review and understand you are agent for that work in Richmond. it will be more convenient for me to have it furnished from that place because payment there is easier made. I shall be glad therefore to receive it from you. and this letter presented to Colo. Bernard Peyton of Richmond my correspdt will ensure your receiving payment from him on my account, once a year or oftener if you chuse. I have received No. 46. but not Nos. 44. and 45. which I shall be glad therefore now to receive. accept the assurance of my respect.

Th: J.

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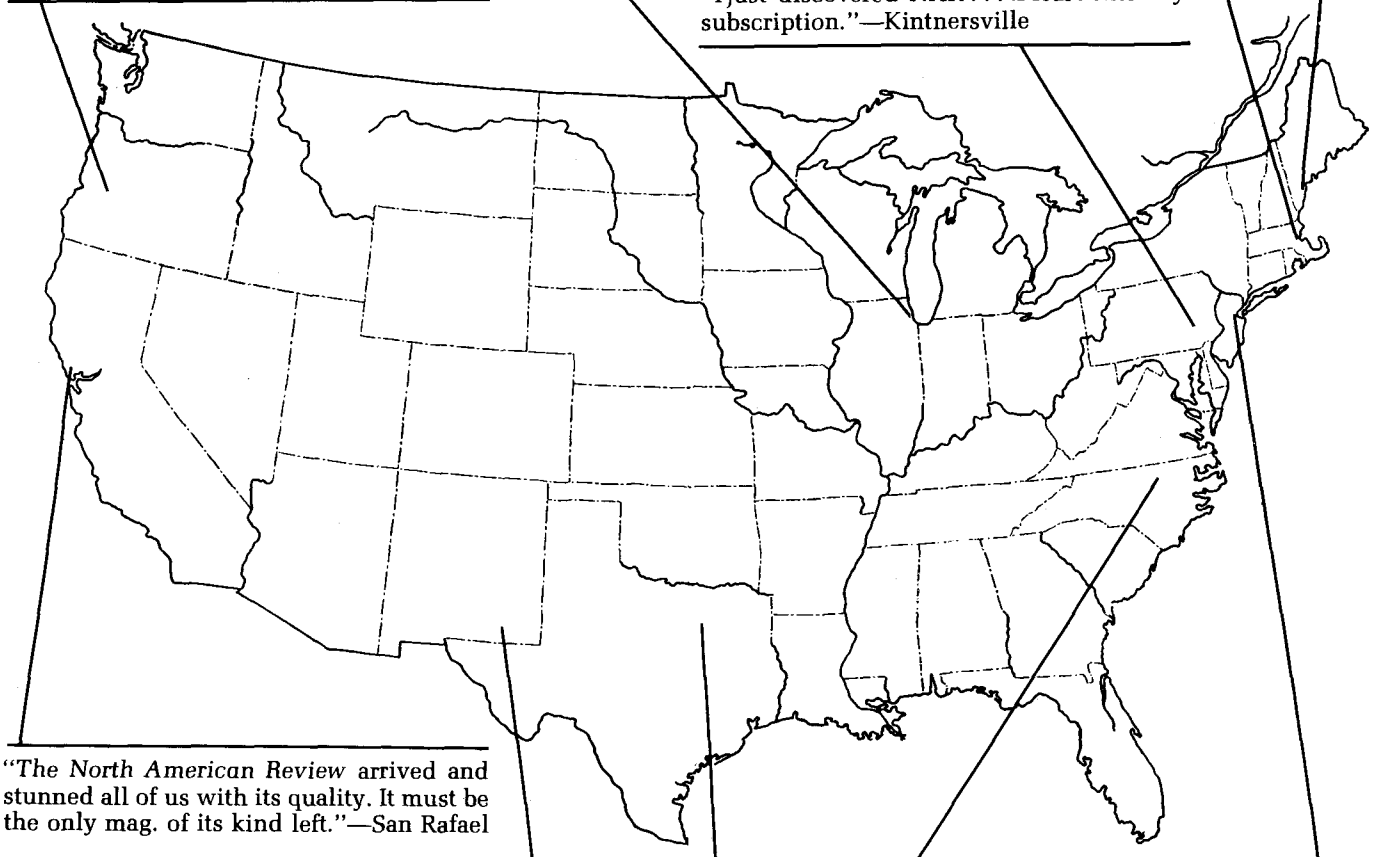

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The North American Review

University of Northern Iowa

Cedar Falls, Iowa 50614

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ABOUT THIS ISSUE

If this "fiction issue" seems more solemn than might be expected on the eve of vacation, perhaps it has something to do with the worsening health of the world—a world which seems with each day of diplomatic bad temper to decline further into madness. If we offer to perk up for the next number of the magazine, we hope constant readers will forgive us our grumpiness and pay attention to some new names in the NAR's pages. Here are stories by newcomers Anthony Caputi, Cinda Tallent, and William Van Wert, alongside second appearances by Larry Hall, Thaisa Frank, Jane Nudelman, and F.D. Reeve; essays and reviews by an all-new cast (the only familiar is our resident doctor, David Hellerstein); and a quite remarkable array of photographs by Hamish Fulton, drawn from his walks around the world. If we are not forgiven our seriousness, say only that we too are affected by the disproportions of the Falkland Islands adventure. What you may most look forward to is yet another edition of the four-minute short story, September's best concession to the haste and hurry of the times we flounder in.

Some notes of home interest: NAR author Lee K. Abbott has recently received the Cleveland Arts Prize for Literature, presented by the Cleveland Women's City Club; and NAR poetry editor Peter Cooley is the recipient of a $5000 Artist's Fellowship from the Louisiana State Arts Council.

Finally, this letter, from Richard Sacks, of Lynbrook, N.Y.:

"Stuart Dybek makes an error more embarrassing than Willie's on page 49 of your March issue. Mays didn't appear in the '71 series, he played for the Mets in '73 against Oakland."

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★ THE NORTH AMERICAN ★

REVIEW

FOUNDED IN 1815 VOLUME 267, NUMBER 2 JUNE 1982

EDITOR
Robley Wilson, Jr.

POETRY
Peter Cooley

DESIGN
Roy Behrens
James Buckels

CONTRIBUTING EDITORS
Margaret Atwood
David Hellerstein
Leo J. Hertzel
Kenneth Lash
Barry Lopez
Joseph W. Meeker
Stephen Minot
Mary Peterson
Scott Sanders
Lawrence Sturhahn

BUSINESS MANAGER
Charlotte L. Wilson

EDITORIAL &
BUSINESS OFFICES:

University of Northern Iowa
Cedar Falls, Iowa 50614

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Cover: Jon Cisler

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Straight Roads

I pop open a beer, shove a tape into the player and head on down U.S. 287 south from Lamar, Colorado. I've spent Labor Day weekend in the mountains, and it's time to get back to Liberal, Kansas, to work. The window is down, since it's cool and I'm on paved road, and the wind whips my hair and the sleeve of a T-shirt with Thoreau's wild stare ironed on the front. Joni Mitchell's *Hejira* drifts on in tempo with my own, as it has so many times before, and I can forget enough about the road to soak in the landscape.

Now, down out of the mountains, this trip is like so many others out here: wide horizons, wind, space, music, and the rushing of the car and the fenceposts and the lines on the pavement. I'm in an immense region running from Mexico to Canada between U.S. highway 81 and the Rocky Mountains. Few people live here. It's an unspectacular landscape by conventional post-Romantic standards, but it has its own compelling attractions.

The country coarsens for a while south of Lamar. Abrupt drainages that fill with water only a few days each year criss-cross the landscape. Boulders are strewn about, and the rough edges of rock show through thin, pale soil. Bedraggled evergreens that I like to take for juniper are prescient of mountain conifers. The rest of southeastern Colorado, though, is flat and open as far as the eye can see, the western horizon a pregnant swell promising mountains. Soon a landmark slides into view: Two Buttes—two smooth, almost unnatural cones of rock, protruding as if by mistake from the wide flatness. The one to the south is slightly higher; otherwise, a connoisseur of mammaries would agree: Two Beauts. I keep my eye on them. As soon as they pass from view to the north, I watch for my corner. I have to turn east on a Colorado state highway to get to Johnson, Kansas, and thence Liberal.

I could keep heading south on 287 and go to Campo and then east to Liberal. I would like to go through Springfield and the rest of Baca County—I like Baca County, because few others, besides the natives, do. But that route means gravel roads, and I don't want to run the air conditioner or eat the dust or, for that matter, slow down. In this country, you can really drive. I maintain an unpatriotic 65 on U.S. 287, and the semi I'm tailing moves over from time to time to let me pass. But I know my limits—and my car's—and keep my distance. The Labor Day traffic is noticeable, but not troublesome, and vanishes entirely once I'm off 287. In the next 60 miles or so into Johnson, I see only two oncoming vehicles, and none on my side of the road. There are exactly two curves. The hen pheasants on the roadsides are plentiful—closer to home, I accidentally hit one, and the feathers flutter in the grillwork for days.

As I approach Johnson, I plan my route the rest of the way. I finally determine to go south from Johnson a ways, then east to Richfield, south to Rolla, and on to Second Street Road and east to Liberal. These country roads are go gratifyingly dependable. You have in mind a general direction—say, in this case southeast—and you just keep turning south and east until you end up some place you recognize. The roads are absolutely arrow straight except where a river bed or large wash may be more conveniently crossed at an angle or where the survey lines didn't come out even at state or county lines. Take Second Street Road, for example. It gets off to a tricky start in Liberal, since Second Street itself ends in the Beech Aircraft parking lot. But if you jog around the perimeter of what used to be Liberal Army Airbase, the road straightens out—a full 45 miles without a curve, until just outside of Elkhart.

On straight roads, I remember Mike Felder, an honest good-hearted guy from WaKeeney, who tended bar in the club where I worked back in Manhattan (Kansas, of course). Mike said once he thought he'd like Iowa—he'd seen a map, and it looked like Iowa had a lot of straight roads. Mike really trusted straight roads, and now I understand. Ed, whom I have helped with our college Outreach program, driving all over seven counties, said the same thing. He didn't like northern Minnesota. He felt claustrophobic—all those trees, and the roads wound around all over the place, and you couldn't see the towns until you were right there. I always liked northern Minnesota, but I'm beginning to like these straight roads, too. It's not just the lack of surprises and the relaxed vigilance. There is a certain liberation in being able to move directly toward your destination in a headlong rush.

On Second Street Road between Elkhart and Liberal there are four or five weatherbeaten stop signs, which are usually ignored, even by women with small children sliding off their laps. There's a gesture at compliance, and of course you must look both ways as you slow down. If the corner is in wheat stubble or grazing land, cutting back to 50 while checking out the horizon is good enough. If it's milo or corn, you might have to slow down a little more, and if there's someone following, you probably ought to drop clear down to 30. If I'm in the college van with "Home of the Saints" written on the sides, I stop, but I feel a little silly and excessively formal.

There's a lot of familiarity along these roads and many conventions of traffic movement are dispensed with. Very few lines are painted on the roads, for example, and sometimes the grass grows out over the pavement, blurring the edge of the artificial surface. There are (praise heaven) no billboards—in fact, there are few signs of any kind. Occasionally at a corner is a large arrangement of narrow boards, all weathered and indecipherable, giving directions to neighborhood homesteads. And there are county line signs—county lines are important—but usually no state line markers except the requisite notices about weight limits and stopping for school buses when the lights are flashing. If you don't know where you are in this country, a sign saying "Welcome to Kansas"—or Oklahoma or Texas or Colorado—is not going to help.

Not only is it assumed that you know where you are and where you're going out here, it is assumed you know everyone else on the road. On

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the county roads, the state highways, even the lesser traveled U.S. highways like 156 between Garden City and Larned, all the drivers wave. Not a fruity, television-commercial flapping of the hand back and forth, though. Perhaps it's not really a wave at all. More of a salute—one or two fingers of the top hand on the steering wheel are lifted during a split-second of eye contact as the vehicles pass. Hell—there ain't no strangers out here. Anybody on Second Street Road is one of us.

I remember the summer of 1976, trying to lead-foot a U-Haul truck out here with all my worldly possessions. It rained around Great Bend and Larned, I remember, but it soon cleared. It was cool, and there was a rainbow in the east that I could see by turning my head just slightly. Straight ahead was a technicolor sunset, all orange and gold and huge. Taking it all in, I figured I was making a good move, and, later that night, I knew it. The U-Haul ran out of gas just north of Liberal. The first vehicle to come along stopped, and the two farm hands said if I was still there when they came back from "setting water" up by Sublette, they'd bring me some gas. I was, and they did. A few years later, I skidded on January ice and smashed up my car on a bridge. Once again, the first passers-by offered to call the sheriff from Sublette, and, in the meantime, I listened to the coyotes howl and bewept my outcast state. I loved it. Anybody near the Cimarron River on a winter's night is one of us.

Some farmers hereabouts have started growing sunflowers as a cash crop. Sunflowers are supposed to be phototropic, though I've never seen them move myself. I remember only a whole field of them on the road to Hugoton, standing rank on rank, heads hanging heavy, leaves going limp, facing east like a dejected army. And I thought to myself what an appropriate symbol the sunflower is for Kansas, where the population seeks ordered uniformity and dutifully faces east.

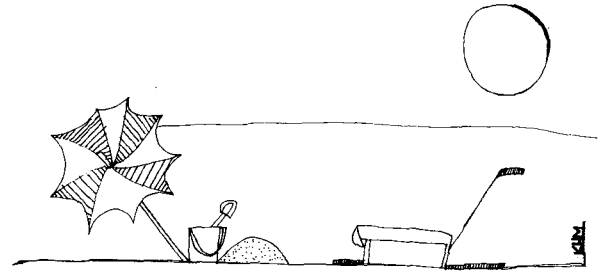
I never thought I would see the day when I agreed with Spiro Agnew, but he was at least partly right in identifying an eastern media establishment. Yes. Yes, it's there—the amusement or condescension or rare wonder with which the commentators send their occasional messages from the heartland. Oh yes—the heartland. A nice, hokey name for a nice, hokey place inhabited by nice, hokey people (or *folks,* as Charles Kuralt would say). I resent the amusement lurking beneath serious dissections of Iowa political processes in January and I resent superficial attempts to convey the energy and significance of the Kansas wheat harvest in July—attempts that fail to capture its almost monomaniacal intensity while missing the pointed irony of an effort that is frequently a losing battle for the farmer.

And I don't even belong yet to this strong, quiet, eastward-bowing society. I may be a native midwesterner who spent the best years of my youth in rural Warren County, Iowa, but I've only lived "out here" six years, long enough to know it's not long enough. Heckman, our resident artist, puts on a mock western voice and snarls, "We don't like strangers." But that's not it, really. I'm not a complete stranger to rural America. This country is just a little different from where I grew up, and so are its people. I like the people, despite their shortcomings as perceived by the eastern media. And even though I'm not fully acclimated, I've been here long enough to resent the judgments of others upon us.

Take, for instance, a recent book about Baca County, Colorado. The authors never say their book is about Baca County—they give no place names and doctor their photographs to protect their secret. Maybe that's how they got Baca County to cooperate. But anyone familiar with this country knows it's Baca County under inspection, and anyone who reads a map can figure out where "the southeasternmost county in Colorado" is. The authors are sociologists and I suppose their book met with approval from their colleagues, as the study of a culture different from their own. Oh, the man was a native of Denver, but he got his masters in sociology at Michigan; the woman was an easterner, coming to Walsh, Colorado, by way of Sarah Lawrence and Princeton. Not surprisingly, these two find Walsh (pop. 900) rather constricting. They make a pass at appreciating the sweep of the landscape and the toughness of a native population who have managed to survive in such unpromising circumstances. But they find life in the small towns confining, limiting, debilitatingly conventional. They are oppressed by the lack of imagination, by the insularity. They talk to a high school teacher (also an outsider) who is depressed when he looks through a recent yearbook and counts the kids who are married and living in town, married and living in town.

I recited this to Heckman, a high plains native who stopped out long enough to get an MFA, and he jumped in to make the point. Suppose you took some folks from Walsh to Sarah Lawrence and asked them what they thought. Or go through a high school yearbook from any city in the country, large or small, and get depressed at the number of graduates who are married and living in town, married and living in town. And where would contemporary artists be without a belief in the narrowness, the shallowness, the debilitating conventionality of modern American life in the cities and suburbs? Let the sociologists study the inner city, the suburbs—the dark places, the winding twisted places—and leave our clean high plains alone.

Living out here, we have reason to be a little "different." This is a country where even to look at the landscape is to accept a dare. The land is rough inhospitable buffalo grass and yucca and sagebrush, miles and miles of it, and a huge scary sky—but if you want to make the effort, it can be exhilarating to try to feel significant in such an enormous place. Ever since I took the dare one splendid May morning, discovering the Cimarron River valley en route to Liberal for a job interview, I have been somewhat perplexed by tourists who whine about what a boring state Kansas is. Maybe they just don't look closely enough. Maybe they have no sporting blood.



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True, this is dust bowl country. Even irrigation, hailed here as the greatest technological advance in agriculture since the plow, doesn't help much. The wind blows fiercely hot in summer—our severe season—and if the usual 15 to 18 inches of moisture doesn't come in winter, by spring the land is at the mercy of the winds. The first spring I was here, the dirt blew as it hadn't for nearly twenty years. Even my students had seen nothing like it before. The air was choking thick, everything seen through a tan cloud, and the world looked like an old daguerreotype. You couldn't see from building to building and roads west of here were closed. I was teaching Eliot that day: "I will show you fear in a handful of dust." My students failed to catch the potency of the allusion—they were too busy watching the roof of the Pizza Hut disappear and reappear through swirling clouds in the college parking lot.

The dirty 'thirties changed this country. Towns faded away. Old homesteads fell apart. Some stayed, some survived, and relics abound. Sometimes on Saturdays in the fall Heckman and I drive around the country taking photographs and drinking beer. We search for and find the old things—wagons, buckets, barns, stone fence posts, scarecrows, water tanks—and then Heckman paints them all winter. Sometimes he calls me late at night while he's painting something particularly tedious like the wood grain in a bucket, and we talk about these old things and why they haunt us. We finally decide that it is not that these things are useless. It is their very utility that makes them sad. At one time, the things were essential solutions to problems of everyday living. The wooden buckets, the pumps, the early machines have been abandoned to give people more time. But nonsense—people always have the same amount of time—we just always want more ways to spend it on ourselves. Heckman and I look for the old things and solemnly appreciate the heroic struggle they represent—and then try to joke our way out of sententiousness.

Poet John Garmon, born and raised in the Texas Panhandle, writes that he kept looking for something that stuck up, that broke the horizon line. Those small things, whether old or new, attract more of our attention since all the rest of our world is so undifferentiated. I took a photograph out near Johnson: huge swirling summer gray clouds above an expanse of wheat stubble. The sky was great, but the picture was missing something, some little thing in the foreground to focus the attention—an old tire, a bucket, something. "A fence post would have done it," Heckman said. And he should know. He paints this country all the time. He knows how much he has to cheat. "See?" he tells a watercolor class during an outdoor session. "You have to exaggerate a little. Make this rise just a little higher, make those hills just a little bluer. If you paint it as it is, no one will believe you." The high plains are tough for landscape painters. Heckman uses tube after tube of raw sienna. Driving to Wichita one October afternoon, he looked out the window and said defensively, "See? That's the color Kansas *is*." Or consider lines. The horizon may become boring, but at least people out here understand perspective. The vanishing point is real. The road goes straight ahead, getting ever narrower until it drops off over the edge.

When we go on college canoe trips in the Ozarks, I am almost glad to get off the river after four days. I get tired of being able to see only a little way ahead and behind and of feeling hemmed in by the woods along the bank. It occurs to me that river people must develop a sort of tunnel vision. But perhaps those accustomed to a river would feel as frightened by all of our space as I do by all of their twists and turns and impenetrable banks. I understand now what I once heard about the expanse of prairie landscape sometimes driving pioneer women mad. But it works the other way, too. My sister felt claustrophobic living in the mountains of western Maryland. The sun went down so suddenly, and she could never tell what the weather was going to do. Out here, you can see the fronts move in and out by looking at the sky. You can watch for miles across the plains as scattered showers fall on one section while others lie still in a weird sunlight. You can see the fine gray veil of rain that swoops down in a graceful curve, sometimes torn off before reaching the ground.

Larry McMurtry, another Texan, quotes a description of this country "where the sky determines so much." Yes. The sky is better than television sometimes. I remember one incredible sunset that I watched all the way from Coldwater one winter evening. A thin strip along the horizon was clear, but most of the rest of the western sky was a wide, upward slanting sheet of clouds that turned from gray to pink to yellow to gold and back through pink to gray again. There were four of us in the car—not terribly well acquainted—and the conversation trailed off as the sky changed. We were all watching it, but no one wanted to be the first goop to say so. Finally Ed ventured an understatement: "Nice sunset, isn't it?" Oh yes.

There are other things to see out here where the sky is the feature attraction. Moonrise, for example, is sometimes shocking, when the moon is full or nearly so. It sprawls obesely over the horizon, not like a moon at all. You look twice sometimes before you recognize a moon—it is just a few wisps of cloud until you realize the wisps are contained in a perfect circle. The moon sits on the horizon for a while, corpulent, diffuse, almost incoherent, then pulls itself together as it rises like a person with a hangover. Sometimes this happens in tones of pink that bleach to white as the sun rolls further away. Sometimes it's orange. At times the full moon in this open landscape can be almost bright enough to read by. One night, huddled in my sleeping bag against the mosquitoes of Baca County, I was awakened by moonrise. It was astonishing and confusing until I recognized the moon and not the sun.

Man-made objects, too, have a distracting clarity. By day, the grain elevators of a town creep up over the horizon and pull your eye their way for six or eight or even ten miles. At night, lights of farms and feed-yards and towns dot the landscape and define the horizon, without ever really getting in the way. The blinking red stoplight at the junction of U.S. highways 56 and 83 in Sublette—the only stop sign in 65 miles—can be seen from over six miles to the north. I always stop at that one, because I've been looking at it for so long it would be rude not to.

All this will change, of course. It is changing now. Malodorous feed-yards and packing plants taint what we brag of as pure air. All the fine particles produced by a growing human population and their cars and their new coal-fired power plant at Garden City will soon obscure the Sublette stop light and the stars.

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Each spring more quarter sections of sage and yucca submit to the automated ministrations of irrigation sprinklers to become fat-cat carpets of alfalfa or healthy but barren corn fields. And people here think it's progess, like the folks back home who seem not to mind that the cuddly hills of Warren County are being turned into golf courses and mobile home parks. (I suppose this is romantic poppycock. The same growth that brings detestable coal-fired generators and other excuses for spiritual malaise also makes possible such luxuries as public radio. So we beat on against the current.)

I love this country. I love the rush of driving along county roads hell-bent for Ulysses or Satanta or wherever. The landscape pushes in and pushes in and I finally burst upon the thought "I love—" and then I'm stumped, trying to think of a direct object. Just what is it that I love? This country, of course, but there's more to it.

One night on the way to Hugoton it hits me. Here's what it is, I tell myself—the thrill of an apparent lack of restraint. There's nobody around to watch you run the stop sign or to catch you speeding—or at least you *feel* as if there's nobody around, which is what really matters. No distractions by man and his conventions. A freedom from restraint and a corollary intensity of one's own pursuits. The headlong rush to your destination. True, there *are* stop signs and houses and irrigation pumps and grain elevators and even county sheriffs, but they can all be easily ignored in favor of the sky and your own individual momentum.

Another night, I'm on Second Street Road, driving back from Elkhart and watching the moon pull itself together. Queen and huntress, chaste and fair, I think, indulging in an allusion. I turn the dial to our local public radio station and behold!—well-bred graduate student voices reading William Carlos Williams. "Only the poem/Only the *made* poem/can redeem us." The reading is followed by piano music. And of course, *of course*, it's Beethoven's "Moonlight" Sonata, played for my own personal enjoyment as the moon gathers intensity. This, I think, *this* is the way to have it: listening to splendid music as I rush headlong across Kansas, running stop signs under a rising moon.

–Peg Wherry

ALBERT GOLDBARTH

ANYBODY'S POEM

It's night. You're walking. You're trying to walk it
off. The hedges on either side are filled with dark
so thick, you think if you forced your way through them
darkness would stretch like a web. You stick
with the road. You want yourself back.
You simply want to walk and breathe
until a few of the stars come close, and enter,
and fill your bones again. This is what it's like,
the loan of your bones to the world; you said
to some: here, you who need to bang the copper gong
for your ceremonial dances, here is a bone for the day,
and you who need a pointer to learn the next word
in the blackboard's farthest corner, and you
who need to fashion a giant x to be seen from the air,
and you with the scarecrow's trousseau but no sticks,
my friends, please use them, make a flute,
dip each end in pitch for a flaming baton between
the cheerleader's presumptuous thighs, my friends,
my needers of measuring rule and pestle, my lovelies,
use my bones. So what did you expect?
They're back, the marrow bland, and even the words
you find tonight to talk about it—*dark, bones, stars*—
don't sound like yours. You re-read it: this
could be anybody's poem. You need to walk
yourself clear. And then to walk yourself filled again.
Already, the city's just a rim of clinkers
behind you. Dark enough, and your hand is only
a pale root. If you feel a weight
in your shouldermuscles now, it could be that wings,
like any transport through the ethereal, get folded away
to little practical packets in this world. Don't
deny them. You think you're crazy. Of course
you're crazy. You're the design in the weave
of a thousand gnats. Each minute, you're more complete.
With every step, your craziness is more the standard unit
the world conforms to. Can't you feel it: air,
as it crosses your mouth, being hurt and burning?
That's not barbed wire. It's only a few stars settled
on your lips. You've been gone so long you forgot
you left a few lights on, to fool the burglars, what
they taught you when you were young, a glow
in every room to wait your returning, a lightning-bug
blinking dutifully in every ivory knob.
You breathe, you know your name so I needn't say it,
it's dark, there are stars that sing in your bones, these
are your words and you use them.

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Events Subsequent upon Publishing a Book

When my book was at the point of coming out, in April, my wife suggested we have a party to celebrate the event. "Nah," I said. "Why not?" she said. "I don't know," I said. But I did know. A mere party for such an event? No, she was underrating it. Even if she'd suggested a huge banner across the front of the house: IT'S A BOOK!

The order of magnitude (v. Alexander Haig) I had in mind far surpassed the conservative, the traditional. I was secretly considering changing my name. As a book author I was no longer the same *persona* as the dutiful, the conscientious, columnist. Even though the book is largely a collection of my columns. That's the whole point. As a book, they seem to have changed *their* name. They've taken on a different identity. Independent. Except for the very recent ones, they're strangers. Oh, I've read them at some time or other, but I don't recall having written them. Some I'm not sure I quite understand. Others are so foreign that not only do I not recall writing them, but I assure you that I could not now do so, I wouldn't know how, not even if you stuck a gun to my ear.

It's partly a result of time, partly of place. The cliché about parts and whole is insufficient here. Where "collections" are concerned, the whole is neither less nor more than the sum of its parts. It's other. I wrote these things one at a time over a space of ten or twelve years. When you mix them up, put them all together in one jar, existing now as if simultaneous, you get something else altogether. That something else is the "book." It seems like someone else's book.

And it is. It's Simon Raven's book.

Simon Raven is the new name I thought to choose. To my knowledge there already is one, but he's in England, and the world is big enough for both of us. Anyway, Simon Raven is a name for an author. Memorable. Strange. A bit threatening. And this book of mine is a strange book, or so it seems to me. The title is assertive, if a bit wry. But once you get into it: a color-blind vegetarian in love with a circus cannon-lady who stutters; a blind guy getting beat up, abandoned by his dog; a great howling against television, a poem about cancer; a weird piece about the nose, a long rocketing thing about a huge snake. . . . Kenneth Lash doesn't write a book like that. Ask anyone who knows him.

Look up Kenneth Lash in *Who's Who*. You'll find a gent, credentials, a Yale man for God's sake. Yale men don't write like this, not even the mean ones like William Buckley. But Simon Raven does. Oh yes. Ever-

The book Mr. Lash refers to is, of course, A Lot for the Money *(see inside back cover). Other contributors to this month's front and back matter: Peg Wherry is an Iowan transplanted bravely to Kansas; Welch Everman lives in Madison, Wisconsin; Richard Orodenker teaches at Peirce Jr. College in Philadelphia; Mary Hood is writing in Georgia.*

more. Simon Raven wasn't born to the preppie look. His diapers weren't two-pin natural shape, no padding. Further, Kenneth is a playful boy, always on the lookout for a laugh. You'd think he was one of life's grasshoppers if he weren't quite so quick with his comebacks. And there's no pretentiousness to the fellow. A bit snobbish maybe, but not pretentious. Agreeable, actually. Many people like to see him coming. They like to laugh.

They'll never get a laugh from Simon. He's an ant. Ants lift Xy times their weight. You can't do that while you're laughing. Simon has work to do. Don't ask him for affability, smiles, nice manners. And be goddamned quiet around him. Even a cat is hardly quiet enough for Simon when he's working. Play a transistor radio within a half-mile of him and he'll try to get you a ten-year term in prison (not jail—prison). There is one thing about him. He doesn't write on a typewriter, of course, that's for the likes of Harold Robbins. He writes in a Lazy-Boy, footstool extended, pad slipping around on his lap. And he uses different-colored pens. A touch of the sybarite after all. Just a touch.

Schizophrenia is nothing to split your sides at. I have to take Simon seriously, as comedy does tragedy, as Mutt does Jeff. I'm not sure I really approve of the fellow, and if I were his father I wouldn't let him out after ten at night. But of course the unconscious cares nothing for the approval of the conscious; it's quite the other way around. I doubt that Simon cares much one way or another about me, whereas I envy him, and envy has some of admiration in it somewhere. He's so various, so unpredictable, so *gourmet* about life (by which I mean he largely spits it out). There's something raw and disobedient, even unkempt about him. I suppose he gets a cackle, walking around in my Brooks Brothers clothes. Bohemian, outrageously outspoken. He does not, like me, seem to have been born in New England. I wonder if he even likes gardening.

One thing I'm together with him on: I like the book. I find myself sneaking looks at it as it sits here or there, like a father who's loudly on

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record as not having cared about having a child. Both ancient and modern wisdom agree that a book is given birth to, and so it is in effect a child. But unlike a human child, all its nurture and upbringing occur *before* its birth. It is born full-grown. (Recall Athena, slipping full-grown out of Zeus's ear—and quite rightly so, since the ear is where wise poets are impregnated.) And it leaves the house instantly. Goodbye, so long. And it doesn't write home. It's gone. Not much sentiment on either side. There *was* passion, had to be; there is now a calm estrangement. Come upon the book years later on a shelf or table, and polite acknowledgment easily covers the nostalgic twinge.

Remember, a book is not a painting or sculpture, something there's only one of. It's a clone. Sitting there in its replicated form, black on white, it has no public presence of its own. You can't go to a concert and share its life. There may be an occasional, a mayfly, reading. Otherwise, its life is strictly private, someone in a room somewhere opens it up. You don't know it, nor has it anything to do with you, it's strictly between *them*. Except for one period in its life: the coming out. The period of "review." The moment of danger, when the book may betray you.

Suppose it gets a rotten review? Several rotten reviews? Worse yet, no review whatsoever? Humiliation. Public disgrace. Hurt inescapable, let the author be great or small, broadly calm or sinuously neurotic. And this period of danger comes hard on the heels of the happy arrival of the book itself, the moment of publication. It's like being made Admiral, and receiving in the same notice orders to take your fleet on a shakedown cruise between Scylla and Charybdis. When I pried the first copy of my book out of its box, I found myself before long staring at the title. A review was starting up in my head. It began like this: "The first ill-wrought phrase, inaccuracy of language, in Mr. Lash's book is met on the very title page. The book is not, I fear, a lot for the money. Even as money is now reckoned. The presumption. . . ." I couldn't go on. Think of that notice in *The New York Times. The National Enquirer.*

To hell with it. That's Simon Raven's worry, not mine.

—Kenneth Lash

FAITH

albert goldbarth

Faith is Albert Goldbarth's fifteenth book of poems, all published within the past decade, and the third of his New Rivers books. In our view he has one of the boldest and most innovative voices in American poetry. *Faith* is perhaps his most ambitious collection to date. The fifty-seven poems here range over the many faces of belief—from orthodox Judaism through kitsch pyramid worship, to the small, intimate credos and illusions we each live by. By turns comic and sober, confessional and persona-spoken, these various pieces finally cohere in a single forceful vision.

Goldbarth has been published widely in such journals as *The American Poetry Review*, *The Kenyon Review*, and *Poetry*. He has been the recipient of the Texas Institute of Letters Award, *Poetry*'s Jacob Glatstein Memorial Prize, and *Poetry Northwest*'s Theodore Roethke Prize. *Jan. 31* (Doubleday, 1974) was nominated for a National Book Award.

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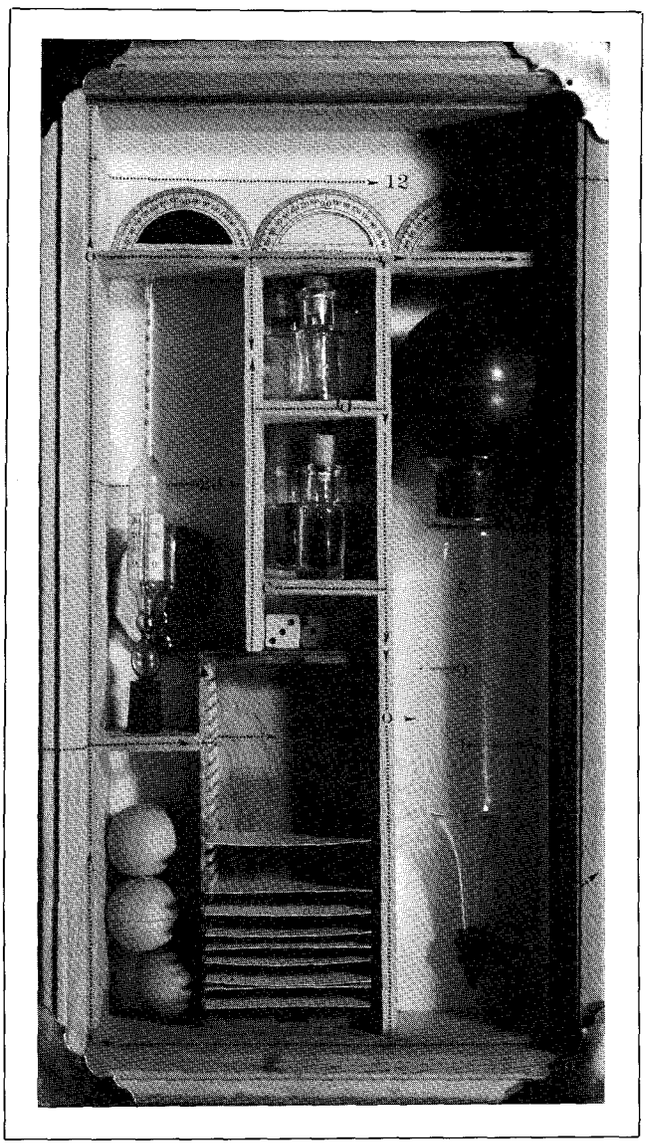
MR. AND MRS. SMITH

CINDA TALLENT



When I went upstairs to the bedroom just now, I thought I saw waking actuate my husband's face; but no, it was the movement of a dream that crossed there. The radio was on, and his glasses were folded on the night table. A concession to sickness, that: usually he moves carelessly from waking to sleep, and I will find him sprawled on the couch, glasses askew and a book dropped open on his face like a shot bird.

He says I should not worry about what dreams mean; he says he dreams very little. When we visited the Minneapolis Zoo, I couldn't interest him in the night animal exhibit. Instead he lagged by a pool window, watching the pair of whales circle their tank. He was intrigued by the question of communication among aquatic mammals; a speaker in the hallway relayed their songs, pipings and sighings, with overlapping echoes. He did not stay long at the ballet-legged dog deer, nosing at the glass between them and an infra-red moon. Joe often talks about the Zoo, how much he enjoyed it, how he'd like to go back. I wanted to write a poem about the dog deer. I hadn't tried to write for years, but something came into my head about that glassed-in forest, with its dead grass and the pile of droppings in the corner. Whatever it was, it disappeared when I stepped into the sunlight and the crowd outside. The flow of people moved like a river, and I found myself separated from Joe and carried down the path toward endangered species, Asian tigers and bears. It was a family crowd, full of cameras and snow cones and baby strollers. It was one of the first truly warm days of spring, and the people around me were animated by an almost hysterical well-being. I could not imagine any one of them sitting down to read a poem that evening.

Joe's right: I don't know why I worry about things like dreams and poetry, things that will take care of themselves without me. Presumably some people still read poetry, and if they don't, does it matter? College girls will continue to write love poems, some of which will be published in small magazines. And my time would be better spent making a shopping list than trying to recall what it was about the dog deer, immured behind glass: some kind of perilous safety? Which doesn't even make sense.

Our dining room window looks out on a courtyard enclosed by the apartment buildings on two sides, the garage on a third, and the alley. Most of the other tenants are old women; encysted by age and inactivity, they seldom come out. Some neighborhood kids have taken over the circular driveway for a racetrack. They ride the low slung, fat-tired bikes Joe calls "Stingrays." A girl shows up occasionally, never for long. Dave, who introduced himself to Joe the day we moved in, is the leader—barrel-chested, about twelve, with a ringing voice. I think two or three of the others are brothers of Dave's, from the blond brood of the truckdriver next door. That is, I know Dave lives in the big white house, and we've met his father, who used his snowblower to clear the front walks for the old ladies last January. (A mystery: did the landlady pay him to do it, or was it out of kindness?) I cannot tell to which house any of the other boys might belong: the gang flows indiscriminately in and out of doors and yards, collecting and dispersing to its own rhythms. The parents of these houses are never visible; it's as if they've resigned themselves to that background of existence they occupy in children's minds.

It is just past the summer solstice and five months of marriage, and the radio is playing a '30s recording of Gilbert and Sullivan's *Pirates of Penzance.* The windows

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are open, and the breezeless air washes up sour smells in the kitchen and smaller bedroom. It is an old building, with the ghostly detritus of other lives secure in its cracks. I am making ramen soup for Joe, standing back from the steam, and he has sat down, a weary curve, at the dining room table. With his white terrycloth robe belted over wrinkled corduroy pants, he looks slightly ridiculous, a samurai rag doll. This attitude of illness irritates me, I can't help it; I flip a paper napkin beside his bowl and pour the soup without looking up. Such behavior makes Joe nervous. As if, having poured, I might replace the pan on the stove, put my rings on the sill above the sink, and walk out of the house. (This is not fair, since I would never do such a thing but know how to give him the impression I could.) The implied threat, or the herb-scented soup steam, wipes a window in the abjectness of Joe's face. His eyes move around the room: pale blue, they look awful when bloodshot, flags of a beleaguered republic. He focuses on the window, grins. "There's your fan club again." This is one of Joe's jokes: that the gang out back has a crush on me, that among the old ladies and tired mothers of the neighborhood I am a pin-up girl in running shorts. Dave has questioned Joe about me, and about my running. A few mornings I've been greeted by the whole gang hanging through the Victorian gimcrackery of Dave's porch, leering like gargoyles. The joke bothers me but I remember in time that Joe is not feeling well. I make a smile, move to where I, too, can look out the window. They are at the height of a race, six or eight of them, wheels and backs inclining tenuously at the curves. It is impressive, the agility and speed with which they lap the circle. There is one boy, Spanish-skinned and shirtless, Dave's lieutenant. He takes the lead as we watch, cutting inside another rider to where his front wheel goes off the cement for a moment, across the dirt of the peony bed, then back on. His face is toward the bike he is passing, and his rear wheel does not leave the pavement.

Joe rises with a sigh and ambles into the living room, collapses on the couch, picks up a book. The back of his head is to me and the lamp lights a seaweedish glint in his hair, unwashed these three days. The conduction of guilt, like that of electricity, is essentially mysterious. The sight of that snarled blond hair gives me a sudden shame, as if I'd been scolded. I would never, for instance, allow a houseplant to grow neglected, discolored. The Boston fern and the schefflera in its woven basket are both flourishing. I know what care a plant requires, but a husband?

I have of course received instruction in the matter: in addition to my mother's rote lessons in laundry and defrosting there were the unspoken lessons in how she dealt with my father. Unlike many women of her generation she had not a particle of martyrdom in her, but substituted a half-humorous deference toward his needs, his expectations. She corrected his grammar, but not too frequently; she served their pre-dinner sherry but joined him in a second only if he was unusually wrought up over some office incident. It was at such times that my sister and I, bored with watching children's shows on tv, would creep up the stairs to listen from the hall. It was her tone that made me think she was humoring him, a tone that smoothed along the nerves the way one strokes the back of a cat. I've always been a better listener than conversationalist: not eavesdropping, really, but listening from outside doors or the next table in a restaurant. If I have to talk, to make answers, I tend to vacillate between saying what I'm thinking and what I assume the other person wants to hear, almost always two different things. And once the words are out of my mouth they loiter in the air, waiting to be misunderstood. This put me at a disadvantage whenever Joe's mother sat me down to talk, the autumn before the wedding. Joe and his father would be sent out to chop wood or plug a rabbit burrow. ("I know it sounds cruel, but it has to be done or they'll ruin the garden next spring.") One particular evening she unravelled an entire sweater sleeve to re-knit a single mistake; a "Gunsmoke" re-run was on, a show she proved almost fatuously fond of—not nostalgia, she hoped she was a forward-looking woman, but it was nice to see the good guys win for a change, wasn't it? A tame fire licked up in the fireplace, reifying the grain of a pine trunk at its moment of extinction. I found myself fascinated by her knees in the firelight, sheathed in practical stockings, incredibly stout, gracious, capable structures of bone and flesh. So that I was not attending closely to what she was saying, something about the full-time job of providing a good home, and I made some remark about the times and two incomes. Since then she has taken a defensive posture with me, she told her husband (this overheard from the next bedroom) that I am a sly one.

So. There is no fireplace in the apartment, the furniture is mismatched; sometimes I look at it and I don't know how it happened, this room, this marriage. Even when I stood at the altar with Joe I had a queer sense of dislocation; I didn't know why I was marrying him. A man who couldn't iron a shirt (which the downtown office requires, with a tie), who had never shopped for his own clothes. But from the moment we met I knew what to say, when to fall silent—how to get him, not even thinking but instinctive, cat-witted. The man who, our friends said, would not marry. Only recently have they slumped, those lauded instincts, like a child prodigy after the math contest. And I am left unsure.

The light has imperceptibly gained that slant which entitles evening, and there is a calm space outside the window, the cyclists having left. If I shut out the things I've heard them say and just watch, there's romance there—a Robin Hood spirit—in their rebellion against the neighborhood with its depressed roofs and balding elms, its hard use of life. A desire for risk and heroism, to be at once in life and free from it, like a plant's tropisms toward and against gravity. I can watch them and think these things, but I am only guessing. I doubt Dave has ever seen Errol Flynn, and Joe and I, who have, hold no hope of great deeds and rewards. We've grown up, and away from that desperate world. Still, I borrow on a remembered sense of feudal humility as I approach him lying on the couch. I put down his book and meet his gaze, puzzled,

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CINDA TALLENT lives in Waterloo, Iowa. This is her first published story.

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soporific. There is nothing more to be said. It is a day. It is time to go to bed.

The next morning Joe feels no better; from under lids dusty with sleep he gives me the immediate serious gaze of waking. That gaze used to fascinate me: it recalls the calm surface of a Wisconsin lake, on the kind of day when the fishing isn't any good. Joe's tongue touches his lips, he half snorts for breath through his nose, croaks, "Don't worry about me." Then, "Hey, what do you give to a Paraclete?" This from the *New York Times* crossword puzzle we worked yesterday. The dictionary gave "Holy Ghost" for Paraclete; the answer that fit was "Thanks." He gropes at the top of the sheet, farcically pulling it over his face.

I throw off the sheet on my side, not viciously (I tell myself) but not gently either, get out of the bed and into running clothes. Outside the August air has already jelled, tremulous with heat, solid with light. It is after nine o'clock; I take the neighborhood streets out to Highway 20. The soft blacktop crumbles into a skinny gravel shoulder where I run. There is a facetious glitter in front of my feet: broken glass, bottle caps, chips of quartz bedizen the dust. I make myself lift my eyes (a good runner does not watch her feet). The weekday traffic streams against me, back toward town: milk trucks, a hog carrier, a plumber's pickup, from which I get a whistle. The terrorized squealing of hogs as they jostle against the rough slats; but it is that whistle which causes my back to tighten defensively. Joe has told me not to take it personally, the wolf whistle, it's just something men do, they're having fun, it doesn't mean anything. With the heel of my hand I scrub the sweat from my forehead, into my hair. And remember too late that I forgot to phone Joe's office; maybe he will do it later, when he wakes up?

Just past the power plant, the Park Road turns off. Robinson Crusoe Park was a joint project of the municipality and the power company. Here the accretion of river silt has been abetted by the back slough of the dam, and a makeshift wilderness has grown up for two miles along the river: scrub oak and willow, sumac, wild grape vine, and a few slim elms like debutantes stranded in a bus station. At the peak of its foliage the park barely manages to take on the shadowy green depths of a woods. The Boy Scouts have marked out trails here and erected, among the second growth, creations of their own. I suspect it was they who invented the park's theme, inspired by its primitive and peninsular character. They must have gotten corrugated siding and iron beams from the power company to put up the trio of oversized umbrellas on the stretch of sand next to the parking lot. I skirt this area, its oxidic ribs glowing tiredly in the sunlight and a bed of charred branches under one umbrella. The fire is recent: papery leaves of carbon lift and settle; it is still breathing. Several bikes lean at the back of the umbrella, chrome shanks silver against the dull ochre poles. Yes, it would be a gang like Dave's, stripping green branches from the nearest tree and roasting marshmallows for breakfast. The Boy Scouts wouldn't use this Park themselves; it is for the uninitiated that they have posted signs: "This Way to the Snake," and a half mile down the trail the snake itself, loops of tire rubber painted green and nailed to a tree. The trails radiate out only a short way from the umbrella area, so the tyro cannot get lost.

Just so, the trail I have taken hits a small elbow of beach where the river has eaten into the sand and even now is fluting rills of soapy pink foam onto it. I double back to the open area again, looking for a longer trail, perhaps one that follows the river. A brief hot wind casts ashes from the heap, and in the still light the umbrellas seem to shudder, like generals' statues before a reform. Beyond the cluster of bikes I spot another sign, the Trail of the Tortoise.

But if I hoped the Boy Scouts knew their Aesop I was over-optimistic; like the first, this trail makes straight for the river, and there stands the tortoise, lifting a green head the size of a two-year-old's from the crabgrass. There is nothing life-like or frightening about the statue: it is a buffoon, constructed crudely from tires. (Apparently there were no young Rodins among the Boy Scouts, either). And then, at my feet—I almost step on it—the carcass of a squirrel, not long dead, not stiffened yet. But with that unmistakeable stillness of death, even if there had not been a line of ants crawling over the soft mound of stomach, to a small red hole where the mouth, the lower jaw, should have been. I find myself trying to picture in my mind what a squirrel's mouth, alive and intact, should look like. And I can't do it, in the same way as a child I could never draw the nose right on a person, full-face. Profiles were easy, the mere trick of a line; so I ended up drawing only profiles. And I am disgusted: the small creature obviously shot by someone and left, oddly relaxed, useless now, to rot in the grass. I turn on my back heel, set off with a sudden energy upriver. The sand is too soft, though: it impedes, and I feel myself sweating more heavily. The sky utterly blue and oblivious; the gray line of the dam in the distance. It is not good running ground; resigned, I begin looking for another trail outlet. To the left there is a slight, under-eroded cliff, with a clump of willows extending onto the overhang, their roots partially exposed. I notice a movement of the curtain of green branches, barely perceptible, furtively suppressed, like the preparations for a children's theatre. And then, from up there, a boy's voice, with a piece of giggle in it. "Hey, there's Mrs. Smith!" I look up but can see nothing now: the green curtain is still. Dave? Because the voice sounded like Dave's and it would be like him to hide, to tease. But Dave knows my name, my husband's name, which isn't Smith.

Another voice comes, deepened this time to imitate a man's: "Hello-o, Mrs. Smith!" with the 'o' drawn out and mocking, like a whistle. The sweat is getting in my eyes, I want to wipe at it but that seems like a timid gesture, I refuse to do it. Instead I blink, a mistake. The world swims and stings, and I can see nothing for a moment. More voices now, an indistinct babble and then one sings out, taunting, "Let's shoot Mrs. Smith!"

It is a ridiculous threat: I pretend not to hear, don't look up. A silence follows, broken only by my feet slogging through sand. My vision clears and I wipe at the sweat now. The air is so thick and warm, it is like trying to breathe through a pillow, and I find myself fighting for air,

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still listening. Just beyond the cliff a trail opens up, into the trees; I veer into a sudden shade, and firm ground meets my feet. There is the chance for speed but the muscles in my thighs are tired, unresponsive. To the left appears the snake with his garish grin; it is as I pass him that I hear something. It is almost nothing, a sound like a sudden expulsion of breath and then—more definite—a tap, like a typewriter key. Or a woodpecker, testing the bark somewhere above the snake. I look up, hoping for the tell-tale flash of red among the branches. Of course, I am telling myself already, but I see nothing. They wouldn't, they couldn't. . . . And then I think I hear it again, more audible this time, a quick sigh. Another tap. Or is it my own breathing, oddly displaced in the noises of the woods? I didn't know, I didn't know. And in me my heart froze like a rabbit. Then ran. I knew nothing; there was only the panicked beat of heart against the rib cage, no legs, no arms. Thought grew thin as skywriting does in the movement of air under heaven. And disappeared.

"I want to go to bed," I said to Joe. He kept asking questions, and the story I'd told sounded false, oddly vicarious, like someone describing an auto accident they'd seen. Joe was feeling better. He had put on clean clothes, combed his hair, and now he prowled the living room. His movements too were tainted with falseness: he kept picking up various objects and putting them down without looking at them, in the style of a contemplative detective. "It's too early for bed," he objected. "It's the middle of the afternoon."

"Nick Charles didn't pace," I said, trying not to sound irritated, to make a joke of it. The Thin Man reference pleased him. "No," he agreed, "but Sherlock Holmes did. Basil Rathbone as Sherlock—" and he struck a pose, jutting his chin out. Then, "But seriously. Do you think it was Dave? I don't believe Dave would do a thing like that. He knows you, for God's sake. The kid's a little wild, not too bright maybe, but still—" Joe shakes his head. "His dad does have a pellet gun . . . but those things are harmless unless you pump them way up. Anyway he wouldn't let the kid go running around with it. Did you hear—" I cut Joe off with a peremptory motion of my hand, then, apologetically, waved it in the air. I didn't know what I had heard. "I'm going upstairs to lie down. You should come too. You could use the sleep, you're not well yet, you know."

Upstairs I take a warm bath and put on an old nylon gown that had been my mother's. I turn on the window fan and prop myself up on the bed with a book. Before long Joe comes up and stands by the bed, irresolute. Then he takes off his pants and gets onto the bed beside me. He rubs a leg against mine, the wiry hairs scratching a little. Then leans over me on one elbow. "But do you think—" "I know for a fact," I interrupt with definitive sweetness, "that Nick and Nora Charles never talked in bed." And I raise my book between us. With a sigh Joe turns onto his other side, pulling his knees up toward his chest. His breathing, still thick, soon slows, becomes regular. I put my book on the floor and humbly, ever so humbly, I curl against that warm damp back, inhaling its odors of illness and detergent, and fall asleep. □

MICHAEL GUDE

BECOMING PRAYER

"Iowa mother hangs children in tree."

This day
a prayer is being written,
the muted light weaving itself
out to darkness, rising,
a wind to feel her body
beneath her dress,
her sex. Reading again
the Old Testament
beneath a day going dark,
a maple alive
long before she took
a name:
Karen Watkins, Mrs.

And on this day
against coming storm,
the bruised and blackened
clouds, a seed fell
like a strangely bent key
on her bible,
was taken as a sign—
curious,
these words of love:
you have not withheld even
your firstborn from me.
You are blest.

She was not amused or mad,
did not call out to the tree
or the wind holding tight
to her dress.
She thought of promises
written on colored paper
and hung with bright ribbons
from a tattered silver tree
in her mother's bedroom,

the promise that children
in death become prayer
and are saved.
The odd key opening doors
where what is done
is nothing,
is only elaboration
on the dark.

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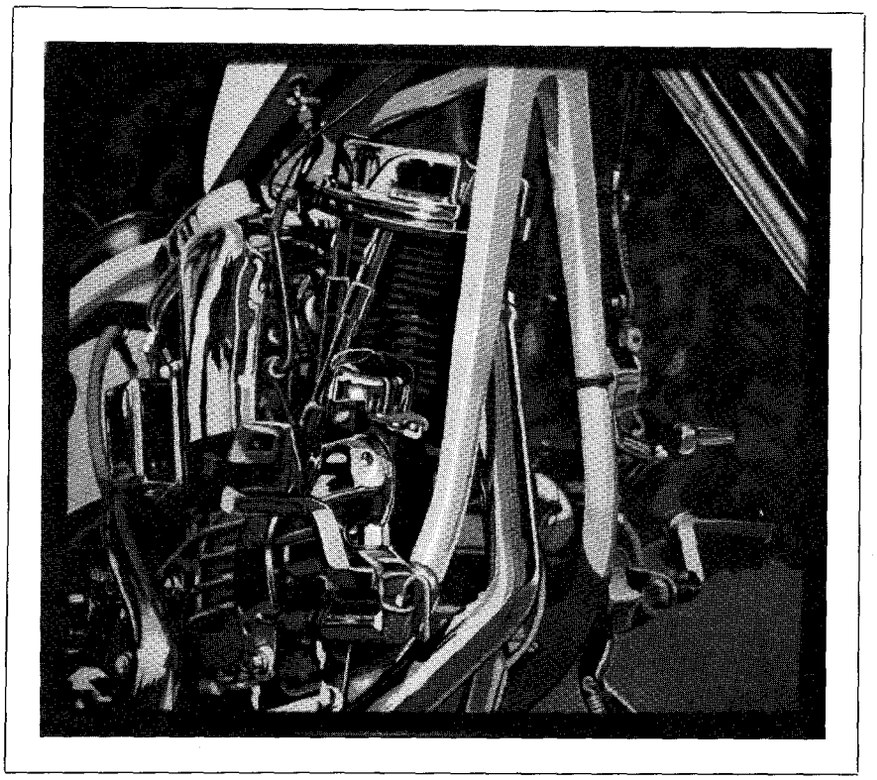
DODGE CITY

THAISA FRANK



Dodge walks into the living room and sits in an overstuffed chair. It's been over a month since he moved out, but Elizabeth has a slight sense of being called into the reserves. "How's Lucy?" she asks. "Fine," he says. "Just fine."

Dodge looks around the living room, remembering how he read Nietzche by yellow lamplight. "Everything was yellow then," he says. "It wasn't," says Elizabeth, even though she knows Dodge is referring to their books, their second-hand furniture, and their worn, corduroy clothes—all of which had a faded, parchment-like quality. Now that Dodge has lost his innocence to Nietzche, he's become a member of the Dodge City Motorcycle Gang, consisting of himself and Lucy Spier, a tall, dark-haired southerner who owns a bright red Harley-Davidson. And, with the weary grace of someone emerging from a bad time, Elizabeth thinks she understands the longings that characterize Dodge's life with Lucy: It has something to do with swashbuckling innocence, old velvet couches, buttons popping under anxious fingers; it has something to do with a shift of frame—cheap plexiglass and Polaroid exchanged for gilt and daguerrotype. Elizabeth thinks she understands with the same weary grace that accompanied watching her father dismember a black Persian rug—a tacky heirloom from his mother's side of the family. ("First one half and then the other," her father said, while Elizabeth and Dodge and all of Elizabeth's brothers watched last Thanksgiving.) His kitchen knife had raised dust storms, and her father didn't stop until he cut the rug into five pieces and doled it out to the siblings. ("Father!" they all said, fascinated.) The rug smelled of mashed potatoes, death, compacted family fights, and its black sides curled like burnt steak. "I don't want it," Elizabeth said when she and Dodge came home. Dodge rolled up the rug and brought it to the garage.

Now Dodge has come over with the improbable offer to buy the rug. "How come?" "I need it to catch grease from the motorcycle." "You can have it." Elizabeth goes to the garage, unearths the rug beneath hiking boots, toaster cords, nails—and hands it to Dodge. Their eyes meet. Dodge says: "It's cut into a smaller piece than I remember." "No. It's only curling more." Dodge spreads his hands wide and places them over the rug. "Miz Lucy is very particular about her gee-rage floor," he says in a Southern accent. "She don't like that motorcycle grease. No, Miz Lucy don't like it." Then he dances on the rug, doing an old soft shoe.

"Yes," says Elizabeth. "I saw that garage once, and I thought it was a very serious garage. You don't think a garage could be serious, but that garage was serious." "Hm . . ." says Dodge. "Yes," says Elizabeth. "It was after we met in Placerville. There were those neat piles of crushed velvet for her jackets, and her philosophy books were alphabetized, and her motorcycle—it was grazing like a horse."

Dodge says nothing. He folds the rug like a large

THAISA FRANK is a practicing psychotherapist in northern California.

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newspaper and walks among the old cardboard boxes which are filled with mason jars and rattle, just slightly. "Can I have this?" he asks, pausing by a silver mint dish on a heap of rags. Elizabeth nods. "Strange," says Dodge, wrapping the dish in an old cloth. "What?" "Everything." Elizabeth thinks he's about to review their life: She's even prepared for a discussion of the day they tried to can walnuts. But Dodge only says: "Remember that great restaurant in Placerville?" And then he walks outside and revs up his black Honda. "Yes," says Elizabeth. "I remember it." "Well, it was a nice place," Dodge says, reaching into the saddlebag and handing Elizabeth an orange.

He leaves, and Elizabeth decides she ought to feel rueful about the Placerville restaurant. It had been built around an abandoned mine, and they'd loved walking past the kitchen, to the end of the tunnel where damp water seeped from the earth. The swinging doors, the shelves of cut glass, the rich dark—it all reminded them of another time, a time when saloon doors creaked and corsets burst and guns were shot from bad guys' hands. One day they'd met Lucy walking through Placerville, miles from where they went to graduate school. She had ridden there on her motorcycle—the red Harley-Davidson she'd brought from Atlanta, and she smiled and explained how she used to love to "tear up the strip" with her three brothers. And Dodge, whose unremarkable black Honda was at home, looked slightly sad. While Elizabeth sat in the restaurant and had a beer, he'd shown Lucy the mine. They'd looked at the antiques near the kitchen—the miniature clocks, old boots, carpenters' chests, a wooden sign that said "Ice"—and then walked to the head of the tunnel. There was an underground cactus garden there, lit by gro-lamps and filled with plaster-of-Paris gnomes: but Dodge and Lucy ignored that garden and headed straight to the end of the tunnel where one could feel water seeping from the earth.

That was in August. Now it's mid-fall. The walnuts are dropping from the walnut tree and Elizabeth looks at her watch and thinks: "I want to challenge Lucy to a duel." Hoping Dodge hasn't returned, she dials the phone and soon hears Lucy saying in her soft southern voice, "A *duel?* Why I never had a duel. . . ." "But you fence, don't you?" says Elizabeth impatiently, remembering some gear in the garage. "Well of course I fence!" says Lucy, as though Elizabeth has suggested some dark and secret absence in her life. Then there's silence followed by muffled conversation. No doubt Dodge has returned and is showing Lucy the black rug and the mint dish. Elizabeth waits on the phone and imagines the black rug, puffing dust, and the acrid rag on the mint dish, emitting garage-like odors. Then Lucy returns and says: "Well . . . okay. . . ." drawing out the last syllable of 'okay' as though she is still groping for an alternative. And then, suddenly, she gets excited and says: "The Duellists! Have you ever seen a movie called 'The Duellists?' " "Yes," says Elizabeth, "those two men were a lot like cats." And she waits through another series of muffled noises (it sounds like Dodge's voice through cotton wool) until Lucy returns, and says, with what seems to be genuine excitement, "Well, let's do it! Let's really do it!"

So they decide on a day—two weeks from this coming Saturday. And a place—a vacant lot, beneath some hills. And witnesses—a group of clear-eyed friends. And when they hang up, Elizabeth goes to the tool shed off the garage where, beneath old blankets, she has hidden a 1953 BMW—ornate, dragon-colored, with gold-plated wings rising from a dark-green seat. I love this thing, she thinks. It's acquired great power through silence.

Actually, it's not easy to prepare for a duel, when she hasn't fenced in years. She remembers her sweaty, adolescent awkwardness in her freshman year at college and her partner—fat, panting Marcy Slavo, whose huge, moon-like face looked grotesque under dreary gymnasium lights. Now she fences with a friend, a therapist, who asks: "But aren't you afraid this new assertiveness will *backfire?*" The friend, whose name is on the university feminist roster, says this can be a problem for women. "I mean we're so used to associating assertiveness with self-*destruction*, you know . . ."

On the morning of the duel, Elizabeth decorates herself with dark lipstick, turquoise scarves, and a borrowed purple jacket to wear over her jeans. She feels alert and purposeful from a night of little sleep, and outside her motorcycle shines a dark, malevolent green, with its gold-winged seat gleaming in the sun. She's just about to mount it, when Lucy calls, and says: "Listen, Elizabeth, I think we've been acting pretty crazy. . . . Do you know what I mean?" "Of course I know what you mean . . ." They are both twenty-seven, but would have felt like nineteen-year-old men, moving with alien precision. They could have imagined themselves backing each other down a long staircase, while the lady in question embroidered in the parlor. Each clash of swords would have defined a new point on some distant grid, pulling them from the vacant lot, deep into some other time.

"Sure I know what you mean," Elizabeth says again. She hangs up, looks at the BMW and thinks: I love this thing. I wanted to ride it to a duel.

But she doesn't ride the motorcycle to a duel. With her hair blowing like a denizen, she rides past Dodge and Lucy's house, breathing fire and streaming turquoise scarves. "My God," says Dodge when he sees her (and he can't help seeing her, since she rides the motorcycle quite near the curb—and not once down the street, but twice). "Where was she hiding that all last year?" And then he turns to Lucy and says: "She wanted to duel with you. Why didn't you follow through?"

That night, tripping over walnuts like an unfamiliar visitor, Dodge knocks on Elizabeth's door. "Hello," he says when she appears. And then he pulls a rag from his pocket and holds it in his hand. The silver mint dish is inside the rag and contains one green mint, which Dodge offers to Elizabeth. She puts the mint in her mouth and tastes a world of rags—dark, damp air, mice who hide with vigilance—all those rancid atmospheres that are drawn to the gravity of old clothes. She wants to spit it out, but the acrid, hardware taste is a crucial element in Dodge's gesture. So she finishes the mint, and asks "How are you?" □

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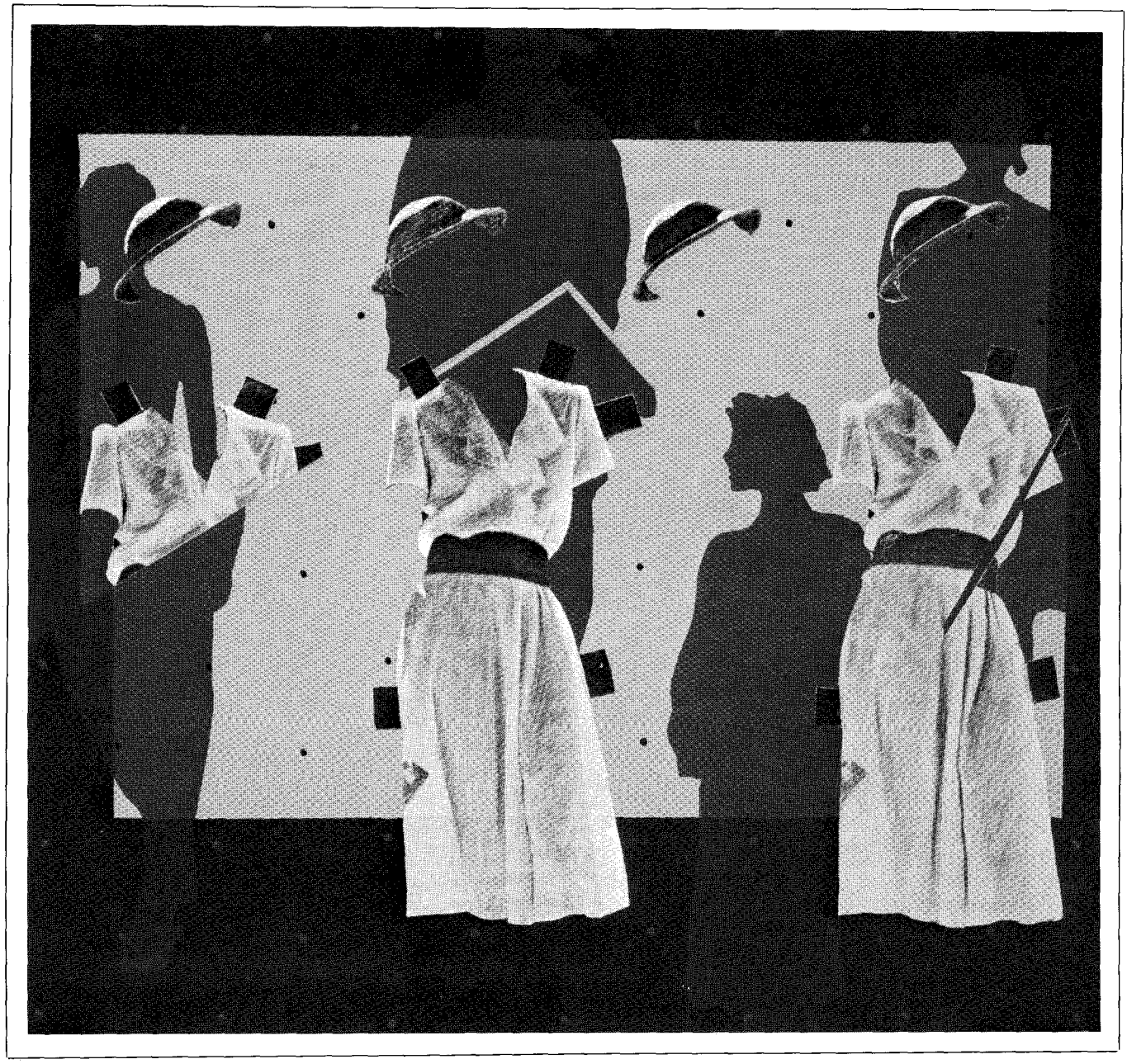
LAWRENCE SARGENT HALL

TWENTY-THREE, PLEASE



Always shining the crystals in that chandelier," she said from the kitchen. If she didn't smoke, and would turn on the ventilator when she was frying, the crystals would not cloud over so fast. Like a virus, the foul air infected their transparency with a milky glaze. There were three hundred and sixty-six of them, one to polish for every day of the year, with one left over except on leap years, when of course they would come out perfectly even. "I don't

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know why you always say you bought the thing for *me*," she said. "I wasn't the one wanted it." Each pendant when clean was like a little star of icy light, and the whole complex was like a twinkling galaxy. "It's out of place in this apartment anyway. It's too elegant." Whenever it was touched into motion it was like a wedding dance sparkling with the sway and swirl of gorgeous earrings. She said: "Now that they won't hire you on new high construction anymore we could use the money." There was not much to show for the money she spent. However expensive, her clothes never could quite disguise her. "Why can't you shine the whole thing at once and be done with it? What good is it you fooling around up there one after one over the table every night? You can't even see the food you're eating by it anyway." At first, three hundred watts had made them glitter to dazzle the eyes, and reflect fiery blue and green aurora; but so much illumination caused the walls and ceiling to close in and box them up. She said: "If you think I'm such a sloppy housekeeper you should come along to some of your neighbors once in a while instead of stargazing through that stupid thing—that telescope all the time." Seventy-five watts let them float watery and golden in a dim pool almost of space. Then they cast shimmering ghosts of themselves on the walls and ceiling, and the dining room was almost transformed by illusion into a planetarium. "A used-furniture dealer was around the building last week and said he would give a hundred dollars plus a replacement if we wanted to sell it." Even the illusion had the same purifying effect of scanning the skies, or working the high structures where the eye could see off the edges of the earth; and the ruts and gulches of the city acrawl with insect-size people and vehicles were made decent by distance. "I like to see where I am," she said. "It's a damn nuisance having you prowling around from one window to another in the dark with that thing every evening so you can watch the lights coming on everywhere else—or your silly stars." The three-legged tubular shadow tilted sharply up between the curtain shadows like a camouflaged anti-aircraft gun loaded for firing. Enemy or not it had been desecration from muddy ambush to inflict black bruises on the guiltless air. "Harmless? I don't know as it's harmless. What would the neighbors think? Do you think they'd believe you were God's peeping Tom, and not pull their shades down?" Tonight there were no stars. The acrid deadly mucus-searing smog kept getting worse by the month. Only the lights from the nearest buildings smoldered in the ashen haze. In the direction of the bridge was a long fluorescent smear like a collapsed rainbow. "I can't remember where I read it but there's some word for what ails you," she said. "Some medical word." In the kitchen a pan clattered, cupboard doors slammed, faucets hissed, the drain gucked. Her heels pounded through into the bathroom, shattering as the hammers of demolition. She said: "Turn out the lights yourself, ding-a-ling. I'm sick of your shadows. I'm going out for some social life. So you're above that—you don't expect I am. You may have been a combat hero and the greatest human fly in the city, but human you're not and who needs a fly?" The bathroom door closed and the key turned indecently in the lock. Water disgorged and there was silence, ran and was silent; then the indecent key turned, the door opened, and the heels hammered into and out of the living room, and the hall door slammed.

When much later she got back she came into the bedroom and one after another switched on every light—ceiling light, reading lamp above the headboard, two lamps on her cluttered and strewn dressing table, sconces beside the full-length mirror, bare bulb inside the open closet. Trapped in the breathless atmosphere were the sickly smell of perfume and the sweet alien smell of alcohol. In the full glare she twisted out of her clothes back-to, bending carelessly down to scoop them off the rug. The odor of perfume with alcohol lingered through her absence while the shower drummed like a summer downpour inside the locked bathroom. All was quiet a short interval before the bathroom door snapped open, the heels invaded the living room, there were slight electrical clicks here and there, the bedroom door presently and definitively shut, the bedroom lights one after another clicked out, the bed sagged in the suspenseful darkness, the covers lifted as if by a puff of wind and settled netlike. Amid a cloying bouquet of alcohol and toilet soap she lay on her side facing out and after one long exasperated breath went oppressively to sleep like a warder outside a dungeon.

High up next morning the weather had worked one of its miracles during the early hours; a wind shift had cleared the smog away except for a transparent dust of low cottony haze that softly absorbed the spreading sunlight. It was nearly as purgative as being up in the planes that had flown the lacerated sacred skies. Wisps and wads of mist in pockets along the banks of the moatish river. A flight of starlings off at a forty-five degree angle way below as if pinned to the river, wings outreaching, in imitation of a taxidermal mock-up in a museum. On parallel headings ships pastured like sea-horses with feathery tails training on the fixed sea. Highways like scratches on the vague flesh of distant landscapes, and a network of railroad tracks resembling the shining trails of clandestine slugs on concrete cellar floors. An underworld of abstract noises and geometric motion, and out of it jutted pinnacles and ridges that had risen through the accumulation of skeletons, human skeletons which, like the calcareous skeletons of coral polyps, had petrified generation upon generation into a stony mass to form the deadly urban reef. But aloft the vivid wind enthralled the ears and laved the cheeks; away up here, sustained by his cunning and tackle a man could surmount the lower vertebrates, a survivor of a higher life, an inheritor of superior vision. If he should happen not to be alone, but suspended in vocational wedlock over the chasms and cells of the millepores, he would observe the features of innocence on another's face and know they were the same on his own. Only in the exquisitely struck balance between life and death is it given a man to know such distillation. In window work this face of chastity is wonderfully confronted by the stencilled faces that, grainy, myopic, and dissolute, gawk from their indoor twilight.

LAWRENCE SARGENT HALL is Chapman Professor of English at Bowdoin College.

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It is not the power to manage or conquer fear that makes a steeplejack. Too much concentration is demanded by the work and the work of movement to spare any for inner balancing. A dedicated steeplejack never thinks about himself—to survive he must be selfless as a saint. The sure and flawless poise for high-work comes only from an exaltation of spirit that rises proportionately with height and danger. Even with that a man may fault, and hurtle from a staging to the streets; but without—without he could never once walk a length of lofty plank. It is as if the voltage of fear, through some mysterious circuiting in a few who are marvellously wired, reverses the normal electrodynamic flow. Pondering the steep converging vacuous shaft generates in such men the currents of consummate passion; mechanical and physical precision are made perfect through precision of the spirit, and every move becomes an act of love.

"So this is no crowd, good buddy. It's a meeting. You pay dues you should come to the meetings and vote. It's to your interest. You maybe spend forty hours a week up here but you got to go down there to get paid." He was an open man, a good partner, except he talked, up where movement is the only language. A few weeks back his wife had had a baby and threatened to leave him unless he took a job on the ground. After that he found he could no longer exult in working the high places, and this meant peril for him and any partner, so he was quitting come Friday. But he couldn't quit thinking about the work, and therefore he had got himself a position as some official in the union and was taking courses in economics and political science at night school. "You better believe I'll miss it. Here nobody's shovin' you or talkin' to you much, there ain't any bosses, any union, and money and women don't amount to nothin'. Nobody's second-rate, every man can be trusted more than a friend or brother. You're on your own but really on your own—you take care of yourself and the next man to you if he needs it. On top you're all you want to be. But sooner or later you got to go down, buddy, and down there you're nothin' if you ain't a part of some organization."

In the fall, when darkness sets in earlier, the high work must be secured a good half-hour before the scheduled closing up of low work, though night does not descend from above but seeps imperceptibly in from below, filling the huge craters and canyons of the city the way the incoming tide mysteriously wells into the puddles and channels of the flats while the sea itself is still a mile or more off on the horizon. At breakfast she had said: "I hope you're prepared to take the bus today, lover-boy. I need the car." What for she had not offered to explain. The morning bus had been mobbed; but homing humanity poured itself into and out of the afternoon one in torrents. More and more passengers crushed together inside till the aisle was clotted and with each swerve and lurch bodies bore against each other buttocks-to-buttocks and hip-to-haunch, intimate without interest, in transit between wherever they had had to be and wherever they were having to go. Once a woman's voice said, "Easy does it, buster!" during a surge to reach the unfolding doors. Unprompted, reflexively, by some instinct of commutation, like migratory birds or schooling fish, in indifferent coherence, groups pushed out of the reductive valves into the streets as other groups from the streets pushed in, so that the bus functioned like a Venturi tube in the intake and discharge of the profligate flux.

All the lights of the living room were ablaze, thin layers of smoke drifting round the shades. She was standing ready in the dining room. The ceiling in the dining room, with its network of lines like the top of a worn tent, was brazenly lit by the glow of a light overhead recessed inside what looked like a translucent washbasin. Two or three loud fat autumn flies, crazed by the glare, dashed themselves senseless against the bulbs within, and whenever they fell into the basin their silhouettes were grotesquely magnified by the contours of the glass. The table had been shoved part way to one side. She stood where the table should have been, in the center of the floor. Underneath the basin her face, neck, shoulders, arms were unwisely illuminated. In spite of her endless succession of showers and baths, if she scrubbed herself scarlet her skin would revert in five minutes to its clayey gray and look as if it still needed further caustic washing. Even the slopes of her lusty breasts were sallow. She said: "Your telescope is in the storage closet where it ought to be. You can do all your peeping from the roof from now on."

The breeze had moderated with nightfall. Though it was still strong enough to keep the smog dispersed it was saturated with a reflecting humidity that cast a faint halo around every source of light. Through this haze the red planet Mars smoked hotly, and in conjunction lower down, inflamed by the sunken sun, the planet Venus, white with a temperature of eight hundred degrees, hung like a reduced moon about to set. A trace of nebulous zodiacal twilight faded away in the west. The sun at this season was in the zone of balance, the sign of all who worked the heights. Through the dark tunnel of the scope several first magnitude stars were visible in the frothy heavens. Each one darted toward the eye as if shooting upward from the bottom of a fountain. Yet the light from nearby Arcturus seen on earth tonight had departed the star—travelling one hundred eighty-six thousand miles a second—thirty-eight years ago, the year she was born, and the Andromeda galaxy, a universe itself, was unthinkably far out in space. The mind was liberated and the imagination transported by realizing that in celestial dimensions humans were, except for this mind and this imagination, infinitesimal specks of molecular dust, not even worth sweeping away.

A minor seismic shock occurred. Light from within the banging hatchway doors fell flat on the tar-black roof, and a shadow fell flat on the light. "They just phoned from headquarters," her voice called, impatiently but with the hesitation she always left in the air to get attention. "A woman has climbed out a twenty-third floor window of the old Acme Hotel." The telescope had to be quickly folded. "Take your time," she said. "She's been out there half-an-hour." She waited in two dark dimensions against the light, then went first, her buttocks swaying complacently, down the narrow stairs. "Naked—" she said whorishly over her shoulder in the hallway. Flashes from the television were flickering from the apartment

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into the hallway on a curtain of electric blue smoke hanging out from the door. "I've been watching it on the tube." She jammed a cigarette into an ashtray and slouched into a chair facing the television. She had said "it." What she had been witnessing for a half-hour was merely *it*, an event like an eclipse, a suspense drama momentarily inserted into the regular program, the spectacle of an act she felt no more need to cope with than with any televised entertainment imitating such an act. "I wondered how long it would take them to get around to calling you. Why don't some of the others—some of the younger ones—volunteer?" she asked, but not in anxiety, not in complaint, with curiosity. "I don't understand why it always has to be you they get." She lit another cigarette and blew an asphyxiating blast of smoke swirling between her tallowy face and the screen. "Not that it interferes with our home life." Reaching down with one hand she hauled, hitched, and tucked her feet into the chair under her bottom.

Younger men precise in body were imprecise of heart. A newsman bobbed and weaved in the front of the picture, describing the situation in the rhetoric of alarm and excursion used in announcing football games. She said shrewdly: "If she *really* wanted to kill herself she'd have jumped by now." But perhaps she was hoping for the last little spark of decision. Behind the newsman were police cars, fire engines, and ambulances, drawn up at various angles and flashing the authoritative beams of emergency. Cameras and spotlights vectored suddenly on a point way up on the indistinct side of a building studded with windows all alight, and there like a plastic angel fastened to a Christmas tree was something lurid identified as a nude woman, causing all this organized commotion. "Naked as the old Eve," she said, spitting her smoke. "Not a stitch on her. She must be getting a little chilly out there, wouldn't you think? This time of year?" The newsman appeared once more thrusting his fisted object under the chins of various officials as though it were a magic wand that would charm their mouths into uttering some oracle.

"Have you seen your horoscope for today?" she called from the living room. "Here—I'd better read it to you." The announcer's patter was cluttered by the rattling paper. "It says—'Not everybody approves your choices. Let people have their freedom and space.' " She and the television were in a shouting duet. " 'They'll stick closer to you. Later in the day will be the time for you to call the turns.' " The televised show was interrupted for station identification. She held up her hand. "How about this? 'Home life will improve in the evening.' " The newspaper was tossed back onto the floor. " 'Male natives tend to seek hazardous occupations, females close personal relations.' " Her surly eyes turned again toward the television screen, and fixed on the small white figurine on the illuminated wall. "So watch your step, Libra-boy, because this one is female and has got no clothes on."

The police had the area in front of the hotel cordoned off around the equipment, and their incessant radio chatter could be faintly heard repeating its formulas. Outside their lines the public, awed by its own pitiless fascination with human disgrace, craned necks and hung on for the outcome. "Please—please come away!" a woman beseeched someone. "I can't bear to watch. Come on—please—please!" the voice wailed. "You stand here as if you *wanted* her to do it. . . ." At the hotel entrance police were admitting only hotel guests and authorized persons, and a cop in each automatic elevator permitted only the latter to get off at the twenty-third floor. The cop blocking the elevator door said: "No, lady, you can't. Reporters not allowed above the lobby." The woman said: "But I've got a job to do. What about freedom of the press?" And the cop said: "I got a job to do too, lady. Takin' orders. I take 'em the lootenant gives 'em. You'll have to see him about freedom." The woman said: "Where can I see him? Where is he?" And the cop said: "He's in room 2343." And the woman said scornfully: "How can I see him if you won't let me off there?" The cop said: "I don't have the slightest, lady. That's your problem. I got my own." A girl in her early twenties wearing bleached blue jeans, a fur jacket, hair down around her shoulders and no make-up, looking as if she hadn't known when she got dressed whether she was going to a picnic or a night club, dangled a key in the cop's face and said: "*We're* on twenty-three." She was with another girl about the same age who had on a mini-skirt and eye-shadow like gun-bluing. The girl in the jeans and fur jacket had an expression on her face as if she had just pulled a sweater on over her head, the girl in the mini-skirt as if she had just pulled one off. "Sorry, sister," the cop said. "Look—" the girl in jeans said, "we have a *key*. And don't call me sister!" Two men with keys in hand were staring meditatively at the thighs of the girl in the mini-skirt. She smiled and they looked blankly on her face. "I don't care if you got ten keys, sister—" the cop was telling the other girl, "the desk clerk'll give you a room on another floor." The girl said: "But our *things* are in *this* room, for God's *sake*!" The cop told her to talk to the bell captain, who would have them transferred; but the girl's face was like a blade. "This thing happens all the time," she said with glinting clarity. So far the event had been called *it* and *thing*. "Some love-sick broad can't make her mind up if she wants to die or live. Is it necessary for the cops to turn the hotel upside down? Is it against the law to kill yourself? What's her crime? Indecent exposure?" The cop said: "That's right." And the girl turned her back and said, "Crap!"

The dingy room was lit by every light in it, and filled with three plainclothes police, two firemen in uniform, a young priest with nylon cheeks, and one wizened little woman—all standing or moving as though they were a repertory company about to go into rehearsal. The uniformed cop at the door said: "Lieutenant—the Indian's here." The phone on the table next to the rumpled bed rang, and a plainclothes cop belched a few words into it. A walkie-talkie on the dresser suddenly blurted something incomprehensible into the room, like a message from Mars; no one paid any attention, and it did it again, then fell silent. A woman's open handbag was on the dresser, its contents spilled out beside the walkie-talkie, a woman's coat was laid neatly on the luggage stand, a dress neatly over the back of the larger of two chairs, as if they were items of the leading lady's costume. The lieutenant came over with the wizened woman whose tight hair, jowly cheeks, and small nose with large nostrils made her

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look like a macaque monkey. He introduced her as a Doctor Someone-or-other, a psychiatrist, and said: "We better get together with the doc a couple minutes first. In here where we can talk." He led the way into the cubicle of a bathroom, put down the lid of the toilet as he went, saying, "Have a seat, doc," and himself roosted on the rim of the bathtub into which the shower nozzle was drizzling. Hung over the curtain rail above him were a woman's underwear and comically empty pantyhose. When one of his ears brushed against one of the toes of the deflated pantyhose he glanced up, slid to one side, and said in the style of a director preparing for the scene: "As you know, you have to coax as well as help them back in." First *it*, then *thing*, now *them*. "We can't exactly say—that's something you'll have to try and find out and sweat out the best way you can. I'll level with you—you're going to have to put everything you got into this one." First *it*, then *thing*, next *them*, now *this* and *one*. "We got practically nothing to go on in here and you got practically nothing to walk on out there. A handbag with no ID, not even a driver's license. Modish clothes. Stylish store. At three-thirty-five this afternoon a man registered single with an out-of-town address. Name—Jasper Card. Desk clerk can't recall anything in particular. We checked him out. There's no such address. Yeah, right—there's got to be such a man, whoever and wherever he may be. We haven't had time at this point to work on it. Okay? Now—she's been there over two hours from when we were notified. About five feet to the left of the window—right—I mean correct, on a shelf ten inches wide about. How she made it without going off—" He flung a deferring hand in the direction of the psychiatrist, who was sitting with her legs crossed on the covered toilet, her stockings and skirt too short for each other. "Doc will try to give you some idea what you're dealing with." *It, thing, them, this, one,* and *what*.

The psychiatrist spoke without emphasis, meticulously, in a scratchy dictaphonic voice. "Female caucasian, blond, estimated one hundred-twenty pounds, late twenties or early thirties. Body suggests athletic ability—which would explain how she got where she is without going over. No evidence of pregnancy from what external observation is possible in the conditions. No evidence of drugs in the room among her belongings, though that does not necessarily rule them out. No evidence of intercourse on the bed, though it was roughed up, or in here. Her underwear does not seem to have been washed, since it is dry." She and the lieutenant glanced reflexively at the garments on the shower-curtain rail. "Efforts to coax her to speak or respond in any way have been completely unsuccessful so far. Her stance could be the result of fear or another equally powerful and confused mental state, or from both. I won't go into technicalities but there are many precedents for this sort of behavior, and definite patterns for it. The problem is twofold. First determine the pattern, then ascertain the strategic way to enter it. In this case. . . ." *It, thing, them, this, one, what,* and *case*. She uncrossed her legs. "In this case the obvious clandestine aspect, in the absence of any evidence of criminality, suggests that the situation has an intensely personal basis, probably sexually inspired, but not necessarily, or not directly. Our confrontation. . . ." *Confrontation*. "Our confrontation would appear to be with a physically fit and attractive female from the middle to upper middle class, suffering an acute emotional crisis connected in one way or another with a man whose relationship is furtive and unactionable by any conventional means. So her behavior here may be a last resort to command his or someone's recognition on a radical basis which could not be established otherwise—combined with despair so overwhelming it cannot gain expression and release except in self-destruction. I beg your pardon? Why is she still there is precisely the question. The answer is probably our key. I am inclined to believe the despair is not absolute and may therefore find relief short of self-extinction, through the expressive act of stepping to the shocking brink of annihilation, with the unconscious urge to be restored to life through some hoped-for but undefined purgatorial reversal or mitigation of the desperate commitment."

In getting up from the edge of the bathtub the lieutenant collected one calf of the pantyhose across his head, and brushed it away looking annoyed and embarrased. He said: "Sometimes they just change their minds when they get out there, after they look down." The psychiatrist asked, abruptly personal and anxious, rising from the toilet seat: "Do you understand what I mean? To put it colloquially it's sort of the next-to-last battle against hopelessness." She turned over her shoulder from the door a face a thousand years old. "Let's see," she added in locker-room terms, "if we can't win it this time." The lieutenant, ushering the conference to a close after she had gone, said: "We have to have these shrinks. They're like the priests. I don't know as they do much good but I can't see they do any harm."

The sashes and drapes had been removed from the black window and lay to one side on the floor; the rope was coiled on the other side, the harness on top, in front of a black-and-white television with the volume turned down so there was no speech. On its screen the small iconic figure, vague and ivory in the spotlights, was in the center of the picture so that it seemed to be merely stationed in an alcove. The priest stepped back from the window and gazed bemused at the view up from the streets he had just been looking down on. In a few seconds, sarcastically to herself as she watched in living color, she would be saying "Crazy Horse—" and the priest would be observing the rescuing shadow simultaneously from inside the room as it rose in the dark window space, and from outside silhouetted against the window alight from within. A lone fly crawled spectrally across the screen. The priest waved a white hand at it, and when it continued its halting movement across the facade of the cameraed building he flicked it daintly away with the tips of his fingers so as not to crush it on the glass. The picture dropped instantaneously to the street—to the announcer moving his lips idiotically against the background of uniforms, vehicles, and systaltic blue and red lights—shifted again for station identification and from that to a speechless commercial advertising a group insurance plan. The young priest murmured bashfully: "God bless you, my son." A night draft through the window cooled the skin; and reverberating as from the far end of an enormous culvert came the occasional hoot of horns. The scratchy voice of the psy-

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chiatrist said wearily: "I'll stand by right here to advise you. Try to get her to talk. To say something—anything." A plainclothes cop spoke off-handedly into the walkie-talkie, which blatted delphically back.

The lieutenant held out the harness. "You know the arrangements—the same as for divers. Nothing says you have to go out there, and nothing says if you do you can't change your mind and not go through with it." He picked up the rope, being careful not to disarrange the coil. "We're all organized and set. The lights are trained. Once you're out you'll see what the problem is. The way the building is built." He glanced at his watch. "Take your time. There's no deadline except ten seconds to the sidewalk. Okay—let's get with it."

The first rule in stepping out calls for standing in perfect arrest. *Let the equipollent body and mind assimilate all minute details of their surroundings. Nothing however slight must go unappreciated.* Every edge and corner, angle, curve, nook, cranny, jut of brick or stone, crumb of cement, wet leaf and splash of bird-lime, every shadow—is momentous. The top of the cornice-like projection leaves what feels to be about two inches of toe with nothing except the cryptic depths where a shower of meteorites is flashing and a pleiad of spotlights focuses on the brink of the building, which seems not to be vertical but to lean gigantically forward onto mere light. A milky opalescence, a luminous essence which is to light as steam is to water, glows as on the wall of a moonlit fortress. The flat top of the narrow cornice underfoot refracts a long dense shadow, uncertain as a floating log, until a flashlight from the window clarifies it. *Keep the head poised and let the cast and roll of eye be slow as a painting, so as almost not to be taking place.* A miniscule mountain range has converged with a mortar canal shining with oily iridescence. Cement presses abrasive and precipitous against the palms. *The body must be allowed to worm through its tenacious adaptation with the invertebrate softness of a caterpillar. There may not be one involuntary twitch of tendon, no precarious cough, no catapulting sneeze.* A single downy feather caught on some masonic barb flutters and threshes as though it were the whole bird straining to escape the snare. Pigeon droppings whiten the cornice-top, but no real life of insect, bird, or beast is on this horrid cliff, as fossil as the side of the moon. Speed Limit—60 i.p.h. . . . sixty inches per hour. . . . Silver-nailed toes seize with a Babinski curl the extreme cornice edge. The larynxes of the prostrate city snore with the sound of tidal bores rushing into and draining out of gorges. Gold filaments glow on the life sculpture. *Concentration must be so fine no thought can violate it.* How should she be intercepted? Her body is as sealed as a prism. Her eyes are shut and her arm is quiet as glass.

"See if you can't get her to accept the rope," the lieutenant advised from the window as if he were breaking a horse. "You can't get too close—you can't get your arms around her without both of you going off. She's got to take it around herself. If she goes you can try to grab her and let us haul you up. If she won't take it you got a choice. You can try to grab her anyway, or you can try working her towards here close enough so we can get a hold of her." The priest, the psychiatrist, and the lieutenant—all three were hanging out the window from the flagrantly lit room into the flagrant eye of television, each with a solution for balancing the obscene equation of gross fact. The psychiatrist said: "You might remind her she's risking your life too." The priest quickly disagreed. "No—no! Don't tell her that. It could precipitate her. She already feels guilty." The psychiatrist said: "Guilt feelings can be a force for correction as well as destruction." But the priest argued: "It would be better to tell her that problems are never as bad as they may seem and can be solved somehow, that we trust her and she can trust us—you care about her, we all of us care about her and would be grateful if she would come in." In a conference tone he added: "Even if she doesn't believe you but only wants to, it could be just enough."

To want to believe, to be believed, to trust and be trusted, care and be cared about, to be grabbed, to be embraced, to be hugged, hugged to death—to lead Eurydice from hell and, the enjoined head turning, deliver back her shameful flesh to anonymity with the shades. . . . "The trouble is," the lieutenant was saying, "once we get a man out there with one of these, something happens. He don't feel right to leave them and come in himself until they go off or decide to come back. Sometimes he may be hanging out there half the night." On a clear fall night the constellated megalopolitan lights stretch toward infinity in all directions like a nether firmament, an infernal system of comets, satellites, meteors, and suns. "It don't look encouraging," the lieutenant said. "She won't open up, won't help herself. She isn't going to cooperate." He spoke censoriously, as if it were her public obligation to be saved in order to justify him and his special equipment in the eyes of his constituents out there in the night, smoking and drinking beer and watching on the tube. "If they won't take a rope I hate to ask any man to run the risk of grabbing a hold of them."

As well wrap a rope around a comet. But what should be the angle of intercept . . .? The index of devotion . . .? The shout was from the lieutenant. "Good God, man—what in the name of Christ—excuse me, Father—do you think you're up to, you wild Indian? Don't do that! What the hell's the idea? Sweet Jesus—he's unharnessed himself!" From his tone he seemed to take the harness dangling below him on the rope his men were tailing onto, empty as the pantyhose that earlier hung over his head in the bathroom, for a repudiation. "The foolish—" He explained almost sorrowfully, "The sight of all that skin has blown his mind." But the psychiatrist theorized: "Not necessarily. He is involving her with someone's problem besides her own." Almost like a cheerleader the priest said: "Good—good! It might just be the saving expression of love."

She has to have heard, but she does not show it. She does not open her eyes, or interrupt the martyred texture of her face. She begins—they say the whole lifetime is supposed to flash like lightning through the darkened memory—she begins to lean her opening arms upon the light-stricken void, formal and stylized and reciprocal, in the supreme airfoil embrace of the ballet partner. Now comes no sense of fall but of ascent, through one cleansing burst of sheer coital light.

Air rushing stopped. □

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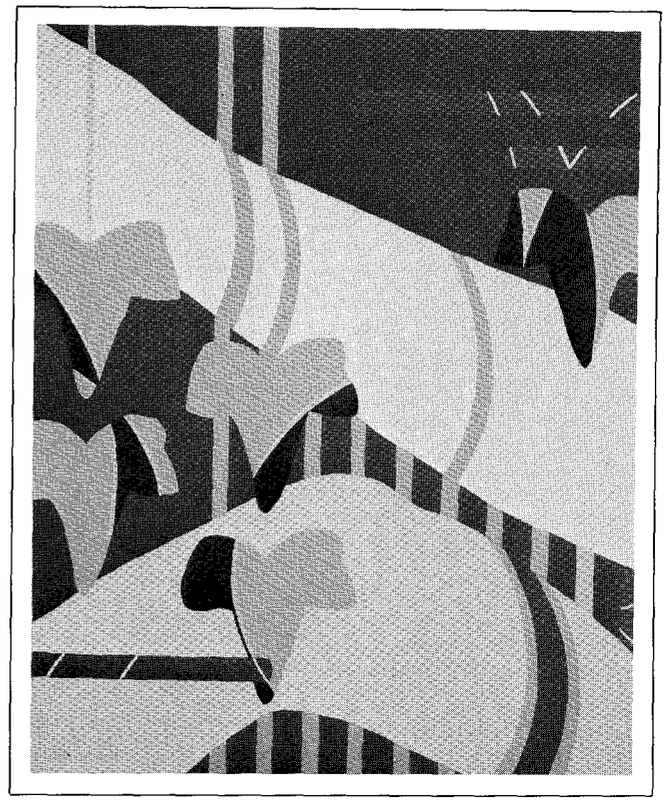
PUTTING & GARDENING

WILLIAM F. VAN WERT



"Looks like rain," my father says with a mixed stare of genteel benevolence and childish malice. As with most things at his age, rain is a mixed blessing: good for the garden, bad for golf.

My father has been retired for twelve years, but he still eats his businessman's breakfast of poached egg and grapefruit at seven a.m., then works on the house and the yard, then "clocks out" at two to play golf. He makes lists for himself the night before of things to do, then crosses them off with the gold Cross pen his employees gave him when he closed the appliance store. He changes light-bulbs, he fixes the toilet that won't flush, he makes wooden shelves for the shanty or devises yet another clothesline for my mother. His clotheslines have been looking more like Calder mobiles in recent years, but he takes no pride in them nor in any "indoors" work. For he is still a farmer in his heart.

He is a farmer who hasn't farmed since he was sixteen. His father died of a heart attack when my father was only thirteen and the last of six children left on the farm. My grandmother kept him on the brand-new Oliver my grandfather bought but never got to use. She watched him going up and down the rows of wheat and corn and beans until sunfall when they would eat together their simple Dutch supper of half-meat and double-starch. He would eat only half of his roast beef, saving the rest for his sandwich the next day at school. But he would eat double helpings of corn and mashed potatoes, something he still does. And he would drink a cold beer, before and after supper, falling asleep in his father's rocking chair promptly after the latter beer. And my grandmother would yell at him in Dutch to wake up and do his lessons and go to bed. She insisted on the lessons even then, knowing that she would sell the farm as soon as he graduated from high school. Perhaps she also knew that he would make his way from Bay City to Midland, selling tomatoes to passing cars.

"Let me check the garden and then we'll clock out fast, okay?" he says with a wink. He doesn't have to ask. I know it's my cue to get the golf bags from the shanty and put them in the trunk of the car.

"Make sure the tees aren't broken and pack a few practice balls for four and seven," he adds. Four and seven are the par 3-holes at the Clare golf course, and they have water traps in front of them. You have to use a five-iron or a three-wood, you have to elevate your tee a little and you have to get the ball up in the air, pop-up fashion, or you go in the woods on the right, into another fairway on the left or into water front and back. I prefer the water, even though it costs my father a ball every time. I like to see the water jump like gunshot in the afternoon sun and hear the "plop" like frog-talk around the green.

My father still has a drink before and after supper, but now it's a manhattan before and a bourbon-and-soda after. And he promptly falls asleep, only now it's a black felt-recliner instead of the old wooden rocker. And sometimes my mother blames it on the golf . . . and sometimes on the drinks.

"Jim . . . ?" my mother says, as though she were taking his pulse.

"Let him sleep, mom," I coax, "he's had a long day."

I know I'm not exaggerating, for my feet are tired too after eighteen holes, front and back, plus four more, a practice four for me to straighten out my drives and for him to practice his putting. I suppress a yawn as I say this, knowing that I would never go to sleep at seven in the evening. My mother and all seven of her children were born night-owls. My father is still a farmer. He can't keep his eyes open after ten o'clock.

"But he promised to make a bonfire tonight."

It's true. He likes to light up the sky on these summer evenings. He does it for his children and their children, the marshmallows half-eaten, the cigarettes smoked to keep the mosquitoes away and then thrown into the fire, the last looks at the lake and its flat blue ripple like a worried forehead. And my father relaxes as he eases the logs into the pit and watches the flames dance up at him. His worried forehead cannot keep its frown, the money ledger in his mind, his Dutch farmer's respect for habit, the forty years he kept the books. His mouth goes slack with the breeze through the birches behind him. He looks

WILLIAM F. VAN WERT teaches film and creative writing at Temple.

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off and surveys the lake with the look of a man about to drown. He eases the spring on his sadness, the firm jaws of silence and too-tight control of a lifetime. And sometimes he laughs at nothing or tells a joke that's not funny or curses or swings an imaginary number one wood into the lake. But mostly he surveys the land, sometimes as an alien might. He doesn't swim or boat or sit on the dock. Sometimes he likes to fish at night when one of his sons will go along. Sometimes he makes one go along . . . to have a chat. But these are not flat lands of ploughed fertility, this is not God's soil for growing, and these white birches will never put food on the table.

"Nice night," he says softly, as much to himself as to me. We both have hands in pockets, and I realize that my gaze goes where his does, my body stretches when his does, involuntarily. Perhaps this is what is meant by being my father's son.

"Jim . . . ?" my mother says again, this time more insistently.

My father turns slightly in the recliner, still snoring and mumbling softly in his sleep.

"Damn . . . " he whispers, "I could have parred that baby."

"I'll par you one, you ole bloater," my mother says, mock-sternly.

It's not the sleep she minds. It's the snoring, the look of lax pleasure around the corners of his mouth, the jaws going gentle, his usual look of kind but unswerving purpose going to putty, the deep lifelines puffing out again, as though his face were up for grabs, an invitation to sculpt. My mother is tired at this time of night. It's too early to play cards and too soon after dishes to do much else but sit. The evening news is just finishing on TV. My mother likes the game shows in the morning, the soapers in the afternoon and the "family" shows at night, especially "Little House on the Prairie," "The Waltons" and "Eight is Enough." This is the only time she doesn't watch TV, because she doesn't like the news. My father puts the news on at six and eleven. He wants to catch the weather, he wants to hear the sports and know what the next day will be like for the garden and the golf. But he often misses the weather on the six o'clock news, because he's asleep, and then he has to stay up for the eleven. If he gets the weather at six, he can go to bed at ten.

My mother has known these habits for forty-some years, and still she objects every night. Yet even her objections are comfortable now, more by rote than by passion, familiar and perfected, a little like the way an Olivier recites his Shakespeare, having recited it a thousand times already.

"Well? What is it, dear?" my father asks finally, some ten minutes after my mother has stopped prodding and begun her sewing in the other room. During the day my parents both act as though I were their honored guest, someone to laugh with and cater to and look lovingly upon, one of their flesh grown up. But at night they revert, they can't help themselves, they act, I'm sure, the way they act when they are alone with no more children left in the nest.

And when there were no more children left, almost seven years ago now, my father did as so many men from Michigan have done: he bought a winter home in Florida. He was like a little peacock for the first few years. It was as though he had bought the entire state of Florida. He began to wear sunglasses and white belts and short-sleeved flower shirts with the top buttons undone, so that his chest hair peeked out like the tuft of a woman from an x-rated movie. He even grew a moustache for a time and looked Jewish and Italian at the same time. He announced that he would never shovel snow again.

"I never realized you hated Michigan winters so much," I told him. "Have you always felt this way?"

He just smiled and that was his answer. I never knew what he had felt all those years of supposed white Christmas and winter wonderland. But he really retired with grace and for good when be bought up Florida. That's when he began to play golf and grow his gardens. The fruit trees brought forth at least twice a year in southern Florida. It reminded me of having read somewhere that women in and around the Amazon menstruate twice and sometimes three times a month, dying of "old age" at thirty. I wonder at that kind of climate where things grow in double-time, while the people, those suede faces that look like immigrants or out-patients from the geriatric ward, the endless Midwestern Mayflower, those people come to retard the harvest of their own spoiled skin.

And my father thrived in that climate. He ate the grapefruit off his trees for breakfast, put on his gloves and went out to mow the lawn, spray the trees, spread mulch and prune the shrubs. He would lay the sticks around his tomatoes that looked so big and gaudy-bulbous, like the insides of watermelons. And he would fondle his limes, the good green smell of photosynthesis all about them, overbig and awkward on the branch, the size of avocados. He spent hours in his yard, chatting with the neighbors who were in their yards, all retired and all watering the lawn.

And my mother would wince at noon and take off her blouse, close the curtains and turn on the air-conditioner. She would iron clothes and watch the afternoon soaps and never peek outside. She missed her children, she missed her sisters and brothers, she missed the Michigan friends who shared cups of coffee with her in the mornings. She adjusted, after a fashion. She baked brownies for the sick, and there were always the sick in their new trailer park. She joined a poker club and went to that every Tuesday night. She started quilting and putting the several hundred photographs of all of us as children into albums. She longed for summer and the cottage in Michigan. She did a lot of waiting, especially at times when her children couldn't get away from their jobs and come down for a visit. She stopped writing letters about this time. She said we were too old now and she was too lazy. She started taking naps in the afternoon, and she began to call us long-distance once or twice a week. And at the same time that she stopped going to church, she began to say "pray to God" in the middle of many of her sentences.

"I don't know," she would giggle, the prerequisite self-denial every time she was about to say something serious, "but I pray to God he don't die before I do. I mean, he loves it down here. He tends his trees and gets down on his knees and plays in dirt for hours. He makes

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his little visits to the neighbors, brings their mail to them, cuts their lawn for them. If it's finished in our yard, he looks for someone else's yard. And you should see the living dolls down here. Looks like someone erased their faces years ago, but they're still ready, and do they ever love your father. Pray to God I don't ever look like that, live long enough to look like that."

"And what about you, Mom?"

"Oh, I'm fine. It's okay. You know me, I like to complain a lot."

"Tell the truth. What about you?"

"I guess it would be okay, honest, if it weren't so stinking hot down here. I itch all the time. I go to scratch a mosquito and it's only heat. I hit myself all the time for nothing."

We both laugh and hang up. That's the way the calls have gone for seven years.

Then she got cancer.

My father called in January, the week after New Year's. Classes had just begun, I was teaching again, I was in the middle of a writing binge.

"Your mother went in for a test last week . . . "

I waited, even though I already knew the rest.

" . . . and, well, they found something."

He choked up. He could barely finish his sentence.

"She didn't want to tell any of you, but I said to her, 'We have to tell the kids.' "

They found something. My poor father couldn't even name the thing, couldn't say that word, couldn't bear that thought. It was his way, this honesty so indirect that the listener had to fill in the blanks. When he told me the facts of life, he called it "intercourse" and "copulation." I was ten years old. I didn't understand a thing he said. I had heard about "screw" and "lay" and "go down" and "all the way," but I had never heard of copulation. He couldn't name the thing.

Something in his voice denied emotion while calling S.O.S. in baby screams. I couldn't sleep, I couldn't think. I took the next plane to Florida and met the man without his mask. My mother was to be operated on the next day. He had just come back from twelve hours at the hospital.

He looked fit and trim in his blue panama suit. He looked ready for Mass, but his eyes were bloodshot and the drink in his hand showed only ice, for the third time in thirty minutes.

"How are you, Dad?"

He tried to say "Fine," he tried to hug me and play host and make me a drink, but he couldn't. He just collapsed in my arms, big bear-man of Dutch silence, his body too shrieked to control and his sad need to control, to fall back into fatherly silence, to hold it all in, the patterns I learnd so well from him. I held his body in my arms, his chest expanse so big I could barely lock my fingers around his back. I held him and whispered to his cheek that he could let down now, and he never said a word about that, not then and not after. But he broke down and sobbed and our bodies, standing near the bourbon bottle, our bodies rocked back and forth, like slow-dancers in the smoke of public places. How they look as though they've melted into each other, or maybe just holding each other up, still swaying to the music, even with the band on break.

And when he broke from my hug, he made himself another drink and cursed and cried for another hour. Trying to be sensible, philosophical, jovial, he kept begging that it be him instead of her. My sister, who had just arrived that afternoon, couldn't stand to see him that way. She kept telling him he had to be strong, and his eyes flashed dark sparks at her, but his head bobbed up and down in mute assent. He shut it up and said no more.

He told me in the car the next day that it did no good to pour forth. It made him weak and tired, so much so that he couldn't "hold his cheer" when he was with my mother. And so he had resolved to shelve the emotions and make the rest of her time some kind of circus of smiles and crackerjacks, worry-free.

He let me sit alone with my mother in her hospital bed. We didn't look at each other much. We just held hands and talked about the weather in Philadelphia and, the few times our eyes met, we tried to laugh but it came out tears. She looked so old and shorn like a bald crow, hunched up like my grandmother and scared and proud, still too proud to complain for herself. I gave back the letter she had written me two years earlier, the one marked "personal" that scolded me for loss of faith, the one that reminded me that I was a "cradle Catholic." Her eyes filled up with wet thanks, but her throat caught, the bandaged throat where they took the lump, it squeaked, and it looked like she wanted to spit on me.

My father paced the floor of the hospital and he sat like a mannequin in the recliner at home. He felt guilty that he couldn't take it away from her and give it to himself. He felt guilty about not showing us a good time, but he felt guilty about going out.

"Let's go hit some golf balls," I urged.

He smiled and nodded no.

"Dad, let's go hit the balls," I commanded.

"I can't do that. What would anyone think, seeing me play golf while she's like that?"

"To hell with what they think. You need to get it out. You need to kill some balls."

He just got up and walked out the door and waited for me in the car. It was the only time that he didn't preach to me on the golf course. No lessons about keeping my left foot on a line with the tee, taking my practice swing, keeping my left arm stiff and not going any further than my shoulder on the arc. He dribbled his first few drives. He was still trying to play good golf.

"Dad, we aren't here to break forty today. I want you to wind up and cream that sucker. I want you to put all your anger into it and rip the cover off the damn ball. Pretend it's the lump they took out."

He wasn't used to such a reckless swing. He wound up high and far behind his neck like some Tarzan reaching overhead for a vine. The silver stick held for a moment behind his neck, looking like a brace for polio. And then he swung through, wild and Babe Ruth striking out. He missed it all and found himself on the seat of his pants. He just put his head into his hands, and I thought I ought to crouch and cradle him. But he came up laughing like a mystic, pray to God, cocked to the eye-balls with root anger and fear. And we just banged away all day, like terrorists. Some holes we didn't even bother to putt out.

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We just picked up our battered balls and went around the green to the next fairway to swing as hard as we could one more time. We lost about twenty balls between us that afternoon in water and woods and bunkers of quicksand. The balls were flopping like pigeon-droppings in the air and skittering helter-skelter through the high grass. And then we went home and got sudden-drunk, so drunk we laughed through the evening news of hurricanes and hijackings, record interest rates and police brutality. After cancer, it was all a joke, a belly-buckle bottle-sucking motherlode of gold humor. It was good to hear that other people were dying.

I went to Florida to hold it in, like my father, to hold it all together and heal them both. To give back what they had given, wasn't that what a son was supposed to do? To make them laugh. Scold them. Take care of the essentials, like meals and laundry and groceries. I went down there to touch my mother, the untouchable one now, and to talk with my father, the silent master of mind-control. But instead I ended up hugging my father and being with him in his silence. I ended up talking a lot with my mother and asking her to ask for herself.

"What's the lesson in all of this, Mom? What does it mean for you?"

"Hell if I know," she said casually, eyes off on the floor somewhere, biting her lip.

She had what was called the early superivenicaval syndrome, and what it meant was the choking off of blood, the puffed cheeks and collapsed right lung and vessels on her neck like bean sprouts. Before I left she had begun her cobalt of five-thousand rads, a little Hiroshima at a time, in the squat aluminum hovel with the sign on the door: WARNING: DO NOT PLAY ON ROOF.

"Looks like rain," my father would say, driving to the treatments. It rained every afternoon in Fort Myers, and the rain whipped up the royal palms that usually looked like sculptures of cement, it whipped them up and made them look like helicopter blades, and then it all dried up just as predictably as the fast food huts and the endless excursions to Winn-Dixie for the "sales." Rain was not the enemy here. It came and went everyday, and my father gardened before it and golfed after it. And in between, during the downpour, we would go for the treatments, the traffic bumper-to-bumper, slow-mo and excreting exhaust so thick the houses shimmered in the sun and the pampas grass looked like a cheap cowboy movie.

"Hot," my mother complained. "Hot as Dutch love."

We watched the other patients come in and go out, some bandaged and some burned, all of them making weak gestures of good luck to each other, the modern-day lepers. My mother got nauseous looking at them, the treatment more hideous than the disease, all those people with red-beet noses, wigs on and wobbly, their lips looking green and withered like the pulp of the lime.

I tried but I could not go gentle into that good night. I had the most pornographic dreams every night, as though the savage sexual mutilation of babies, the sweet surrender of my brother's wife, the hind-end humping with any and every woman I have ever known were the antidote, the only cure for cancer and this helpless hopeless feeling of standing still and watching my mother turn into a prune. It reminded me of the whores I used to see in Thailand, their imperious eyes of yellow peril and their sweet, noxious breath between pale-pink teeth from the betel-nut juice, asking me the passerby:

"Hey, honey, you want fucking or sucking?"

And it was true now. I thought of every last one of them in my dreams, and it was true. That was all I wanted out of life.

We all went to Florida to be with my mother. Some brought their children, and there was no way to predict behavior, before or after. Two of my brothers went down and spent their days on the beach, unable to cope, to look at her without breaking down. My sister began to act like my mother, look like her, scolding my father for drinking and falling asleep and playing golf.

Where was the lesson in all of this?

I went down there again in March during our spring break. My mother had just finished the cobalt treatments and was about to begin chemo-therapy, biting her nails and looking a little unkept, derelict, taking bird-bites of despair for breakfast and lunch, a piece of old toast and twenty cups of black coffee. The grapefruit on my father's trees were in their second bloom, fresh and plump and pink inside, somehow so sexual that this pink pulp be the first thing the tongue should touch in the morning. By contrast, my father's golf balls looked a little smaller, a little bruised from bad contact and off-center chipping.

My mother was still alive, even though the doctors said she might not last beyond April. Carcinoma and metastasis. Even the doctors couldn't name the thing, and my father felt so guilty because he couldn't understand them. He kept dropping by their office, kept calling on the phone, and he couldn't form a picture in his mind for the words they told him.

My mother stayed alive, because my little sister was still anything but little, unmarried and over two-hundred-fifty pounds. She stayed alive because the summer was coming, and that meant the cottage in Michigan. My father tried to suggest that maybe they should stay in Florida, not risk a long drive, stay with the doctors they already knew. My mother wouldn't hear a word of it. She wanted the cottage now more than she had ever wanted any of her seven children.

"I'm still alive, because you kids keep praying, that's what. I don't see how I can die with all that interference," she smiled.

And when I left, she winked at me, the silent sign that this would not be the last time. She still had not come to grips with the cancer. She just offered it up to God, merits for one of her children every time she threw up or went dizzy or got depressed and put her head under the pillow. My parents had buried my Aunt BaBa of cancer two years before. My mother had sworn then that she would never want to die of cancer. My father took out two cancer insurance policies.

They told me about the difficult visits with BaBa in the hospital, how she begged them to take her up to the cottage to die, how they washed their hands after every visit, because they still thought cancer could be caught like a common cold. They talked about wishing friends well who got cancer and about avoiding those people.

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Now my mother could separate her friends in distinct categories: the ones who called but didn't name the thing; the ones who sent cards with spiritual quotes or Rod McKuen poems; the ones who never got in touch with her and the very few who came in person right away and kissed her on the forehead.

"Ain't life cruel?" she said, with the tone of a blackjack dealer, as though you had to expect the unexpected.

My father kept stroking his chin and wondering if he had a lump of his own.

My father taught me how to gather the topmost grapefruit first, the ones that get the most sun. He taught me the time of the day when one could spray; how to tell the quality of an orange by the firmness and shadow at the umbilicus, the place where it was attached to the tree; how to crate tomatoes for best weight and least bruising, the smaller, unripe tomatoes on the bottom and the big red ripe ones on top, separated one from another by little cardboard cut-outs.

He wiped the dew-line of sweat from his bald head and smiled.

"Sometimes I wonder why I ever did anything else."

"Because you had seven kids. . . "

"Perhaps. But if you work the ground, I mean, if you really work it every day, my mother used to say you'd never get dizzy. You'd always know where you were."

"Is that why you do it?"

"Huh? Oh, not really."

"Why, then?"

"I don't know if there are words for that sort of thing."

"Come on, Dad. Why?"

"Well, it teaches me the love of the body. Especially at my age."

I didn't say anything.

"I told you there weren't any words."

And he went back to digging.

My mother's cancer had devoured everything: the worry, the attention, the prayers. My father was a forgotten man. Nobody asked how he was. He stopped getting on the phone when anyone called.

And when I left, she winked at me, her silent promise that this would not be the last time. And my father waited until the last minute, hugged me quickly, the usual fast feeling between grown father and son. But then he kissed me. He did it so quickly that I had to wonder on the plane going back if it had really happened. I cannot remember a single other time that my father has kissed me. I cried, and maybe the crying was somehow assurance that, yes, it actually happened.

"Looks like rain," my father says with his mixed stare of the green thumb and the imp. "We'll go anyway, huh?"

I nod and go to pack up the golf bags in the trunk of his car. And then I walk down to the dock, while he tends his garden. I stare at the lake and wonder why it is that I can never get enough of this clean air and quiet lake. It's more than nostalgia, the remembrance of a good childhood, the carefree swims with my brothers and sisters, the only time my father ever got out his movie camera, some twenty years of cryptic film, from kindergarten to college, of kids that looked like any kids but got to look like him, doing belly-smackers off the end of the dock.

I take a mental snapshot this time, something to develop and return to the next time winter in Philadelphia oppresses me. I like this lake in the morning and at night, lit up or in shadow. I step on the dock and stare for miles, wondering as I walk across the boards why it is that people don't live in the place that speaks to their heart, that feeds their passion. There is no money to feel in my pockets, and of course I know the answer. But maybe the cottage offers me the chance to ask the really foolish questions. I wear my father's sweatshirts and baseball hats, I stop shaving and waste time, I actually take time to stare again. First foot on the dock and I become a character out of Dr. Seuss, a Zanzibar Buck Buck McFate fishing for Doubt-Trout in the cool pool of Nool. I compete with everyone and everything in the city, but here I talk back to crickets and wonder what else these big Dutch hands of mine were made for, besides driving a car and moving a typewriter.

I turn and look at my father, who is throwing up his hands at someone higher than these thunder-clouds overhead. My father is two men, the man in Florida who can make anything grow, who can eat what he grows. Because his garden is always green down there, his golfing is a luxury, something he does as much for the companionship with other men from the park as for his own passion, something he does deliberately, with flair and style. Here in Michigan, there is only this lake and the beach sand that is as barren as it is beautiful. He has imported the grass, which goes bald each summer, the sand swallowing up the little blades of green. He plants no fruit or vegetables in Michigan. Here it's flowers, flowers whose seeds he has bought in a store. He gives them dirt, he waters them and watches over them, even though he doesn't even know their names. The pine trees grow on either side of his flower boxes, the birches swing freely behind them, but the boxes are coffins. His flowers die as quickly as he can plant them.

"Damn," I hear him mutter, unaware that I'm that close, "woman's work . . . "

And he turns to me with that look I've noticed recently, the twisted look of the Feeble in his eyes, the look of drunk driving, delirium tremens. My stomach sinks to see that look of no-care in his eyes. The cancer policies have their limits. My mother is neither dead nor cured, and my father has taken to calculating the cost of the future. I look away at the flowers and understand his despair and their lesson: they bloom and die outside of anyone's control or calculations. Like children. The lesson here is something other than the love of the body, something beyond bad dirt and fallen petals, shriveled stems and bees that have to look elsewhere to drop their pollen. You can't eat the flowers.

So the golf is his business and passion. He goes alone or he goes with the neighbor, but he goes for the golf, not the camaraderie. I go for something else.

Not one of his five sons wanted his appliance business and neither of his two daughters wanted to learn how to type and be a secretary. Now nobody wants to golf with him. But I have consented, at first as a way to be with just my father, this man I have loved all my life and never known. My father goes through a complete personality

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change on the links. His old shoulders straighten up and he walks with a bounce again. He laughs and jokes, winking and whistling at the women golfers, exchanging quick repartees with the men, these other retirees with the hard knocks of their working days written all over their faces, including the eighty-five-year-old crustacean with the craggy cheeks and the twinkle in his eyes, who comes up to tell a joke as stale as the seat of his baggy pants.

"Hey, Jim, you hear the one about the geezer who passed gas in this public place? His friend says, 'Hey, Ed, not with a lady present,' and Ed, he says, 'I didn't know we was taking turns.' "

My father laughs, because respect is required on the golf course. It's a private world of old fools acting young again, and my father admires them because they play eight hours a day. I go along, because it's my only chance to see the boy in my father, and he's happy I've come with him to share his passion. He doesn't care if I lose the balls or if we have to wave the hard-hitters through while we look for my errant drives. And when I really peg one, he watches it go its three-hundred yards and stands transfixed, as though before a miracle.

"Gee, if I only had your power. You don't have to whack it hard, see? It just goes and goes."

I ask him what would have happened if he had discovered golf before he was sixty-two. He shrugs his shoulders in such a way that I know he's asked himself this same question a thousand times.

"I might have spent everything we had," he says with a mock-horrified look on his face.

"Would that have been so terrible?"

"I couldn't have bought in Florida," he says, and this time he's serious.

On my first drive I get to within a hundred yards of the green. The closer I get to the green, the worse I get. It takes me seven more shots to put the ball in the cup. My father, whose drives rarely go more than a hundred-and-fifty yards, has put it in with four shots. He comes close to par on every hole, usually missing with his bad putting.

"It's the chip shots and the putts that separate the men from the boys," he says from someone else's sermon. "Who takes the time to learn how to putt?"

He has taken to hacking the weeds around the cottage with his nine-iron and putter, so that these clubs are as much an extension of his hand as the watch around his wrist. So far, it hasn't helped.

He teaches me the etiquette of golf, all the polite positions of where to stand while someone else swings, what happens if your ball hits someone else's ball, when to take a mulligan and when not, how you can't touch the sand on your practice swing in the sand traps. And we talk golf from the tee to the green. Only on the green and only after we've both put our balls in the cup do we talk about our personal lives. The time it takes to walk from the green to the tee-off mound for the next hole is the allotted time for any real talking.

I have come this time just to be there and be healed as much as to heal. In the nine months from January to August, my marriage has gone bankrupt. One brother and one sister have already left their marriages in these nine months. And, because my parents never talk about the cancer, they have taken on the burden of these marriages as their concern, their worry, their sorrow.

On the green for number three, after my father has put his putt in for par, he asks me.

"Are you compatible?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know. Are you sexually compatible?"

"I don't know how to answer that. I'm turned on all the time. She's turned on almost none of the time."

"But is it something that can be helped? In time? Or therapy?"

"I don't know, Dad. We used to think we saw it the same way."

"Do you need money?"

"Yes. But not from you, thanks."

By then we've reached the mound for teeing off on number four and have to wait another four-hundred-fifty yards before we can talk about anything but golf again.

Something has shown up in my mother's blood test for the week. The new oncologist is afraid that it has spread to her liver.

"As long as it's not my brain," she jokes, for she is most afraid of someone radiating her brain, of becoming a vegetable. But she's also worried about her liver, her lungs and all those organs she can't see and can only feel by the poison of the cytoxin in her chemo-therapy.

"Can we say a rosary together?" I ask. It's something we haven't done as a family for at least twenty-five years. Mary insists that she has to do the dishes and Jo goes to the toilet, so the "family" consists of me and my parents. I can scarcely remember the sorrowful mysteries—the scourging at the pillar, the crowning of thorns, the carrying of the cross, the crucifixion—all those necessary steps toward the resurrection of the body. My father and I take turns saying the "Hail Mary" and my mother says the "Holy Mary."

I ask my mother to stop saying novenas for my marriage and to start praying for herself. I suggest that the "lesson" to her cancer can only come when she feels worthy enough to pray for herself.

"I'll think about it," she says.

I massage my father's feet as I have done every night of my visit. The knotted feet with corns and callouses and bulging veins, gnarled as a hunchback from so many years of steel arch supports, have actually straightened out and lost some of their "crystals," their pus and their stink. And because we have just said the rosary, I begin to feel a little like Christ doing Peter's feet. There are so many questions I want to ask this man, so many things he could tell me, but talk never comes easily. So I massage his feet and let that be enough.

When he has gone to bed, my mother and I talk. With her the talk comes freely, the jokes and side-long glances as codified as traffic signs. We know when to start and stop. And I rub her aching shoulders, she who resists any kind of touching. I realize that I can give to them separately, but I am confused by them as a couple. I revert to stupor, to being their son, to letting them do for me. And I realize why I am a writer: verbose, like my mother, but on paper, preserving the silence of my father.

The next day we go to the hospital and she is pro-

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MOLLY McQUADE

SECRET PEOPLE

Secret people
are climbing up the legs
of larger people.
The smaller
are squash and artichoke,
growths from purple lips,
toes sprung dull green
and fallen from feet.
They are snailing along
the thick legs of our neighbors,
clinging to our flip socks
by tiny pincers,
wobbling, about to cry
if they can't creep up.

They are not jewels, nor grapes.
They are not bought or eaten.
Their wearers wouldn't want them
if they knew they were there.
Crab-apple pronouns,
short-stemmed, dented,
bruised with sentences,
friends, and feelings
—we tried to forget them.
They keep coming back.

All the mistakes we thought we'd buried
or, at least, lost
in the grass or the trash
have shelled out again,
peanuts with worms
rattling, hatching,
loving their larvae,
eyeless but recognizing
the climb up us again

to regain the face,
fasten on the eyes,
pearl the lips close
and diamond the brain.
Knitting us bone-cold
are these timers.
When they have come twice,
we greet ourselves
and welcome them in.

claimed an N.E.D. (non-evaluative disease): clean scans, remission time. There's no overt joy or celebration that night at supper, only this sense of pause in the eye of the storm.

"The lesson," my mother confides that night when we're alone, "is that I have been too proud. I had seven children, they were all whole and healthy, and I bragged them up too much. God is punishing me for that."

It's not the answer I expected after nine months of living with this auto-cannibalism. But it was surely the only way that my mother could rationalize the Book of Job all around her, the only way she could hold the cancer and the broken marriages in the same perspective. One thing about prayer: you always get what you ask for and it never looks like you thought it would.

The next day, my last day at the cottage, my father pleads sheepishly to clock out early and take me golfing.

"Again?" my mother says, irate.

"Honey, what have you got in mind?"

"Not a thing, Jim. Go on, both of you."

We go with her cursed blessing. In the car, his hands so hard around the steering wheel that his knuckles look like polished piano keys, my father starts to sob, the Feeble dancing in his eyes, and he begs for himself.

"It's the only time I don't have my mind on it. I thought she understood that."

I don't say anything. I have no idea of the bargains and compromises they have struck to stick together for forty-two years. But I shudder, involuntarily, for the bare fog of what this body has been through in its lifetime passes over me, this body born on the farm before there was any pollution, this body now strapped in a Buick LeSabre on cruise control, and only the golf course is left to remind one of what the "natural" world must have been like.

"The bitch," he whispers.

I had to hear that whisper to know she was safe with him, to know that he still loved her after all these years.

The greens are separate from everything else on a golf course. They are alone their named color, green and carpet-soft. And my father has a special reverence for putting on these greens. I have watched him walk more softly when he approaches the greens. I have seen him tiptoe around a ball and measure the distance between him and the hole. I still swing too hard on my putts, and today on this, the ninth hole, I have hit grass before ball, so that the ball skipped right over the cup like a stone thrown sideways across the surface of the lake: bump, bump and bump, without ever dropping. My father flicks the ball with his putter, so that it has top-spin, and the ball backs its way into the hole. His ball says 'caution' and mine 'abandon,' and I wonder if we wouldn't be better off, this beloved stranger and I, at our ages, to trade styles for the sake of those who live with us. What do they say? Rage is to age what truth is to youth?

I'm thinking these things when I realize that my father is not walking with me to the car. I turn to see him on hands and knees, lovingly replacing my divot on the magic carpet, this essence of green, the only garden that is left for him. □

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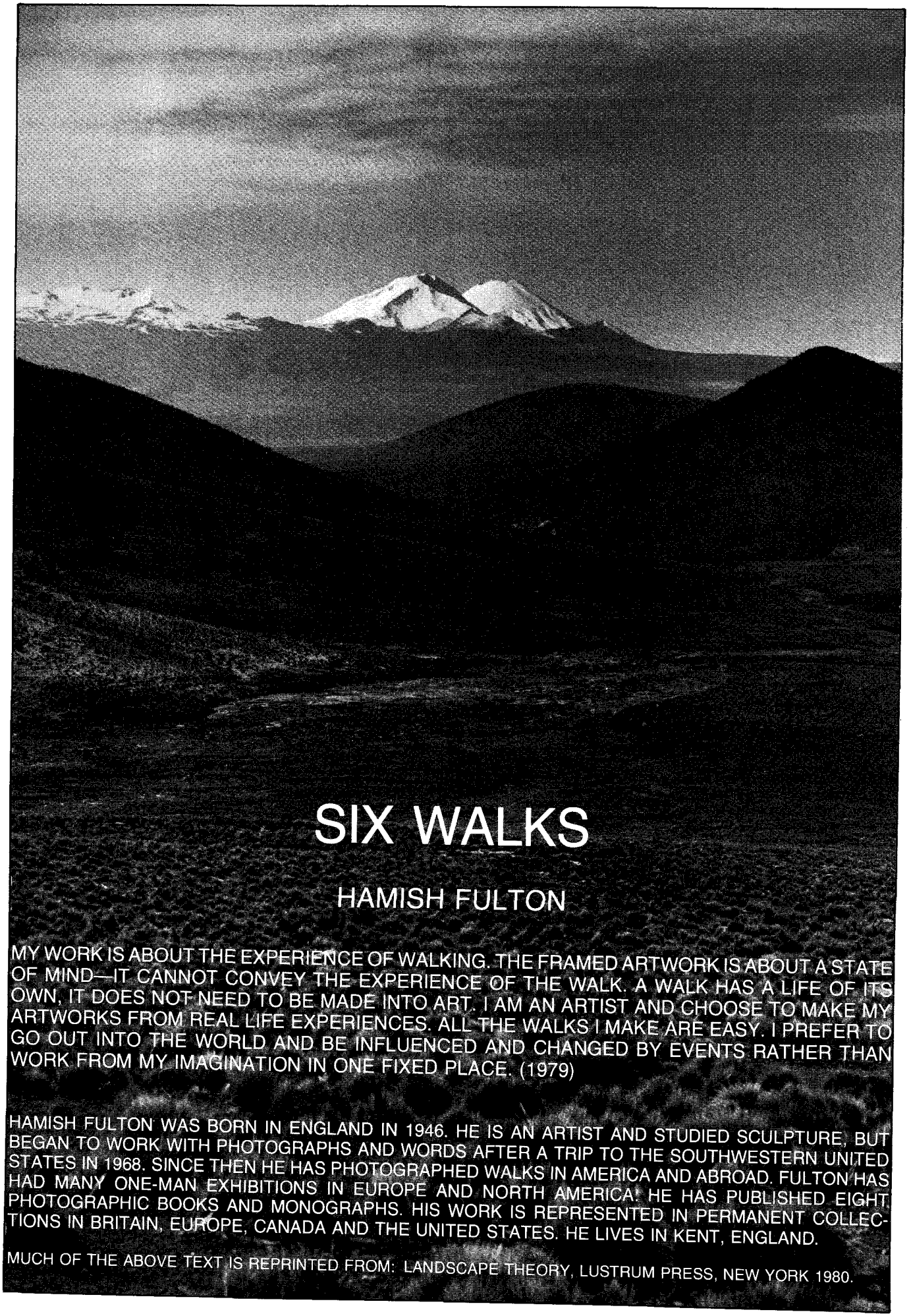

SIX WALKS

HAMISH FULTON

MY WORK IS ABOUT THE EXPERIENCE OF WALKING. THE FRAMED ARTWORK IS ABOUT A STATE OF MIND—IT CANNOT CONVEY THE EXPERIENCE OF THE WALK. A WALK HAS A LIFE OF ITS OWN, IT DOES NOT NEED TO BE MADE INTO ART. I AM AN ARTIST AND CHOOSE TO MAKE MY ARTWORKS FROM REAL LIFE EXPERIENCES. ALL THE WALKS I MAKE ARE EASY. I PREFER TO GO OUT INTO THE WORLD AND BE INFLUENCED AND CHANGED BY EVENTS RATHER THAN WORK FROM MY IMAGINATION IN ONE FIXED PLACE. (1979)

HAMISH FULTON WAS BORN IN ENGLAND IN 1946. HE IS AN ARTIST AND STUDIED SCULPTURE, BUT BEGAN TO WORK WITH PHOTOGRAPHS AND WORDS AFTER A TRIP TO THE SOUTHWESTERN UNITED STATES IN 1968. SINCE THEN HE HAS PHOTOGRAPHED WALKS IN AMERICA AND ABROAD. FULTON HAS HAD MANY ONE-MAN EXHIBITIONS IN EUROPE AND NORTH AMERICA. HE HAS PUBLISHED EIGHT PHOTOGRAPHIC BOOKS AND MONOGRAPHS. HIS WORK IS REPRESENTED IN PERMANENT COLLECTIONS IN BRITAIN, EUROPE, CANADA AND THE UNITED STATES. HE LIVES IN KENT, ENGLAND.

MUCH OF THE ABOVE TEXT IS REPRINTED FROM: LANDSCAPE THEORY, LUSTRUM PRESS, NEW YORK 1980.

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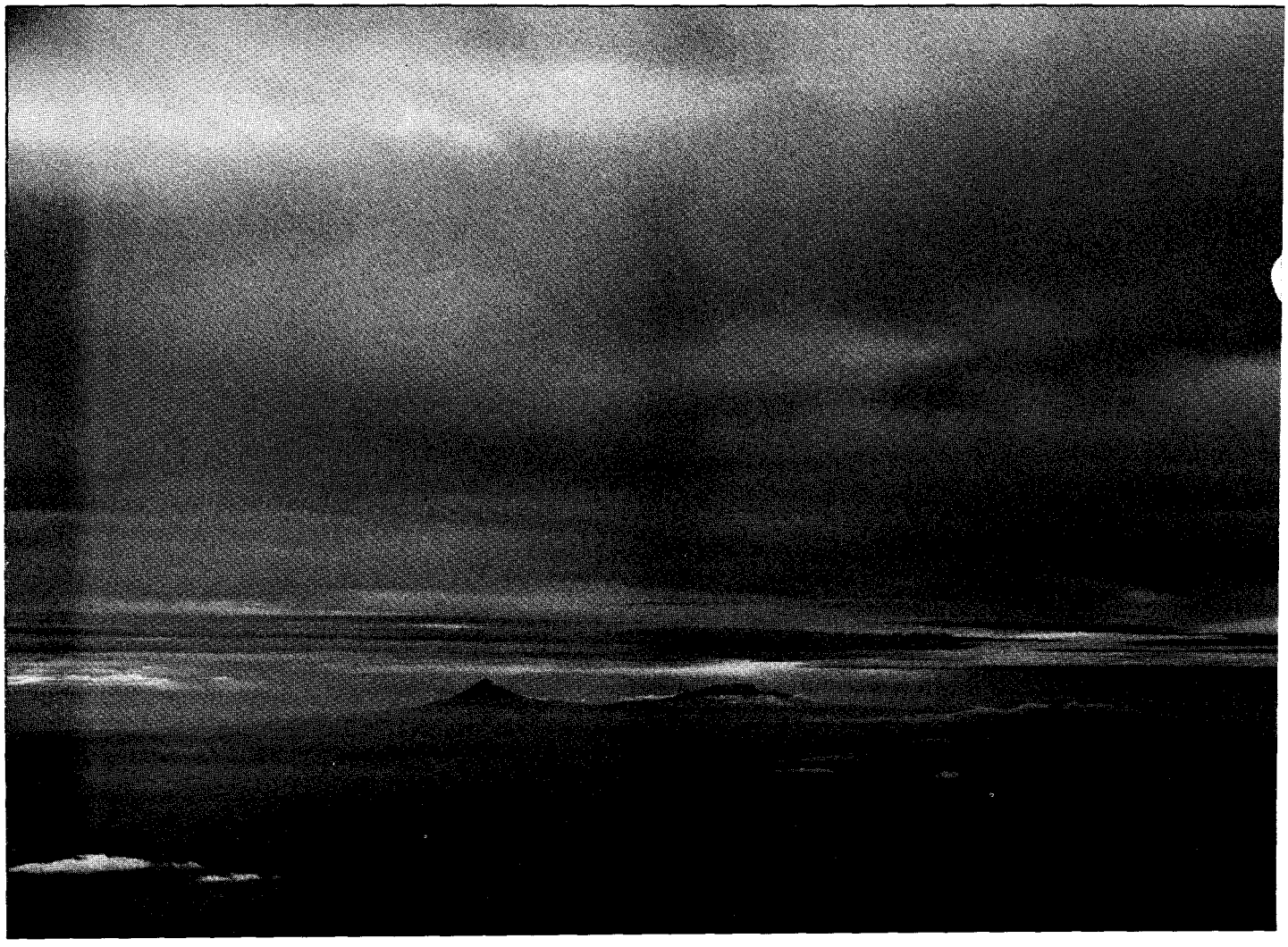

THE CLOUDS AT DUSK A ONE NIGHT BIVOUAC ON THE SUMMIT OF PICO DE ORIZABA MEXICO 1979

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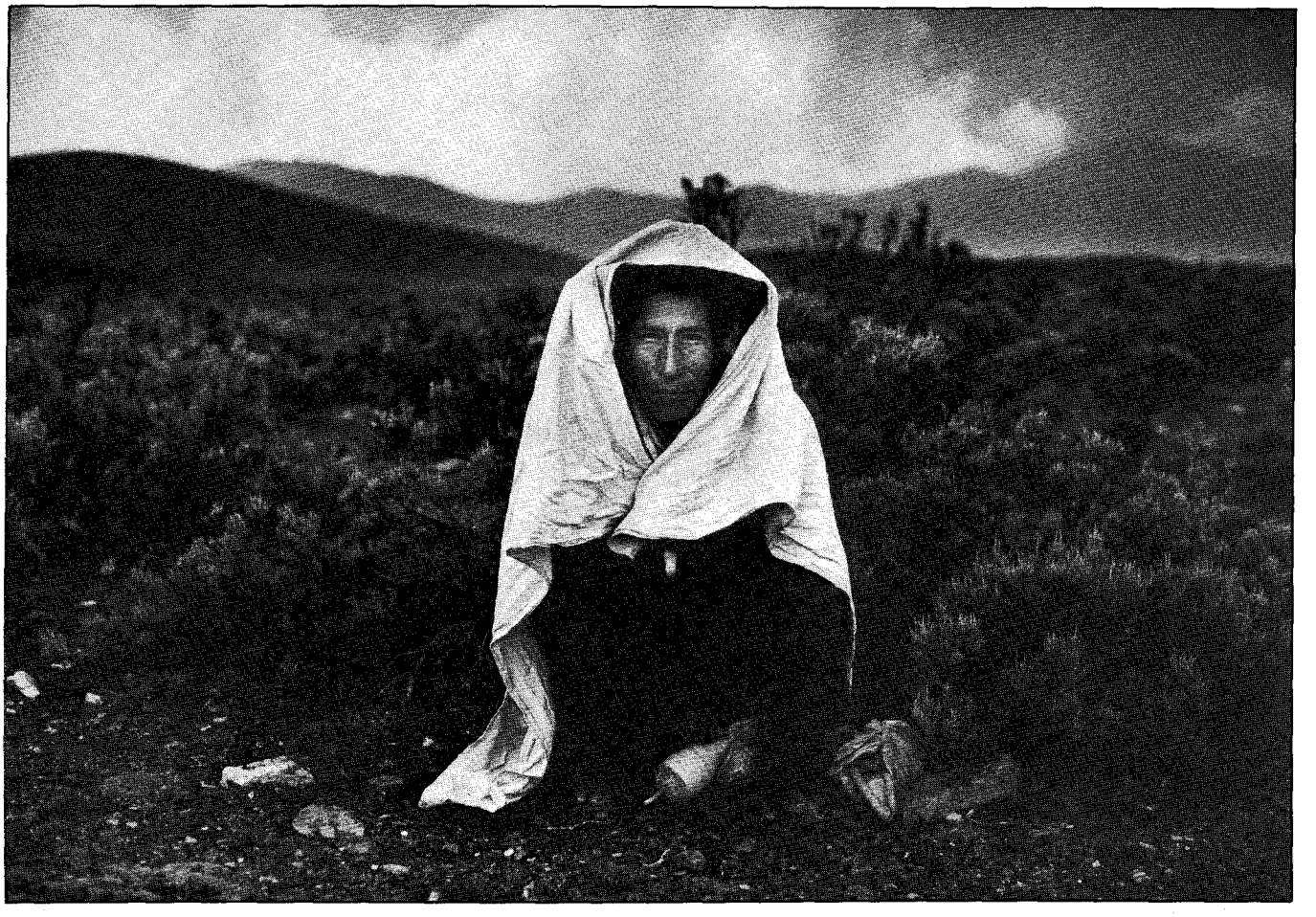

AYMARA

AN ELEVEN DAY WANDERING WALK FROM THE RIO MAURI TO THE RIO ACHUTA AND BACK TO THE RIO MAURI

WESTERN BOLIVIA EARLY 1981

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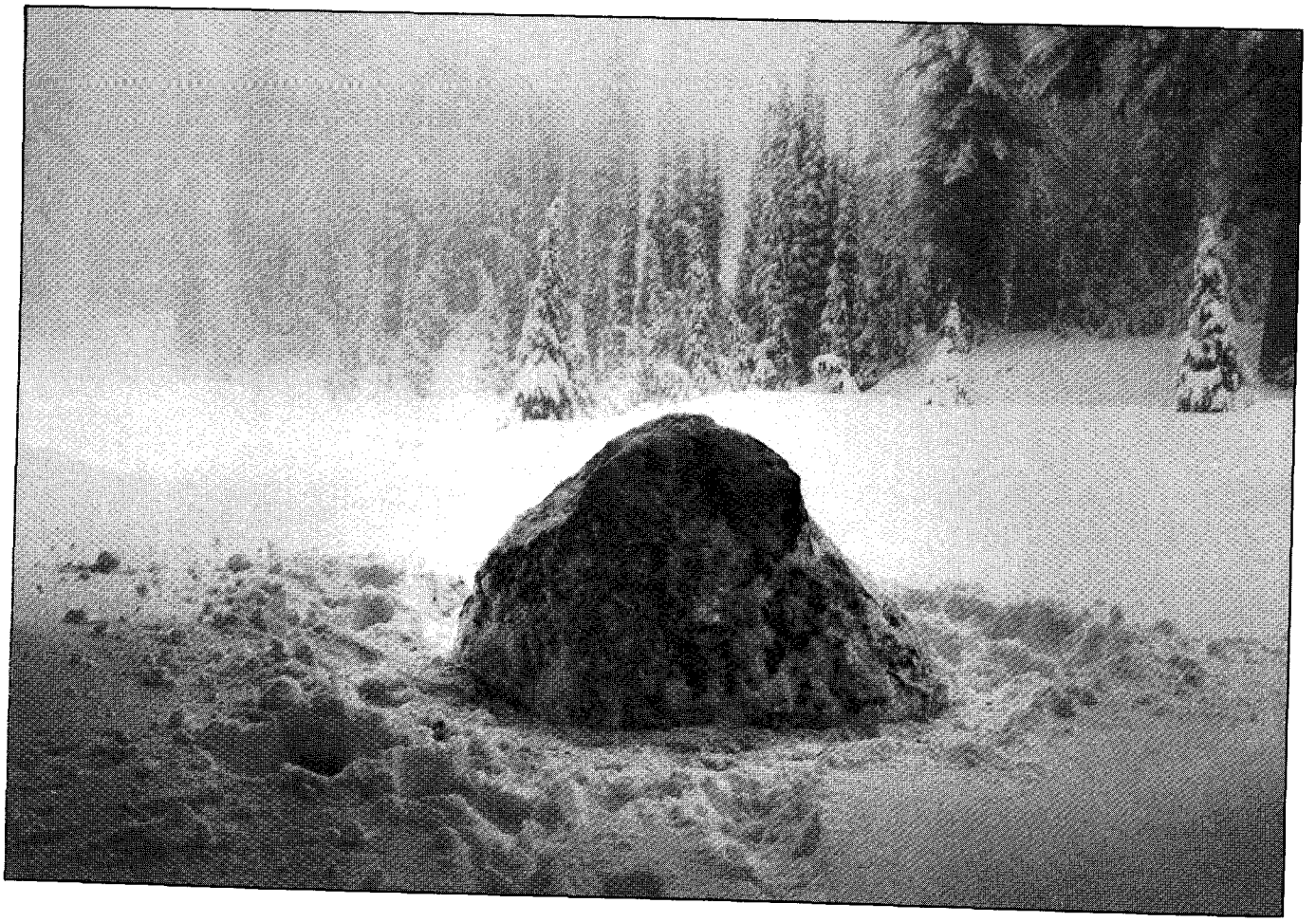

STANDING COYOTE

A SEVEN DAY WALK IN NORTHEASTERN CALIFORNIA
ENDING ON THE NIGHT OF THE OCTOBER FULL MOON 1981

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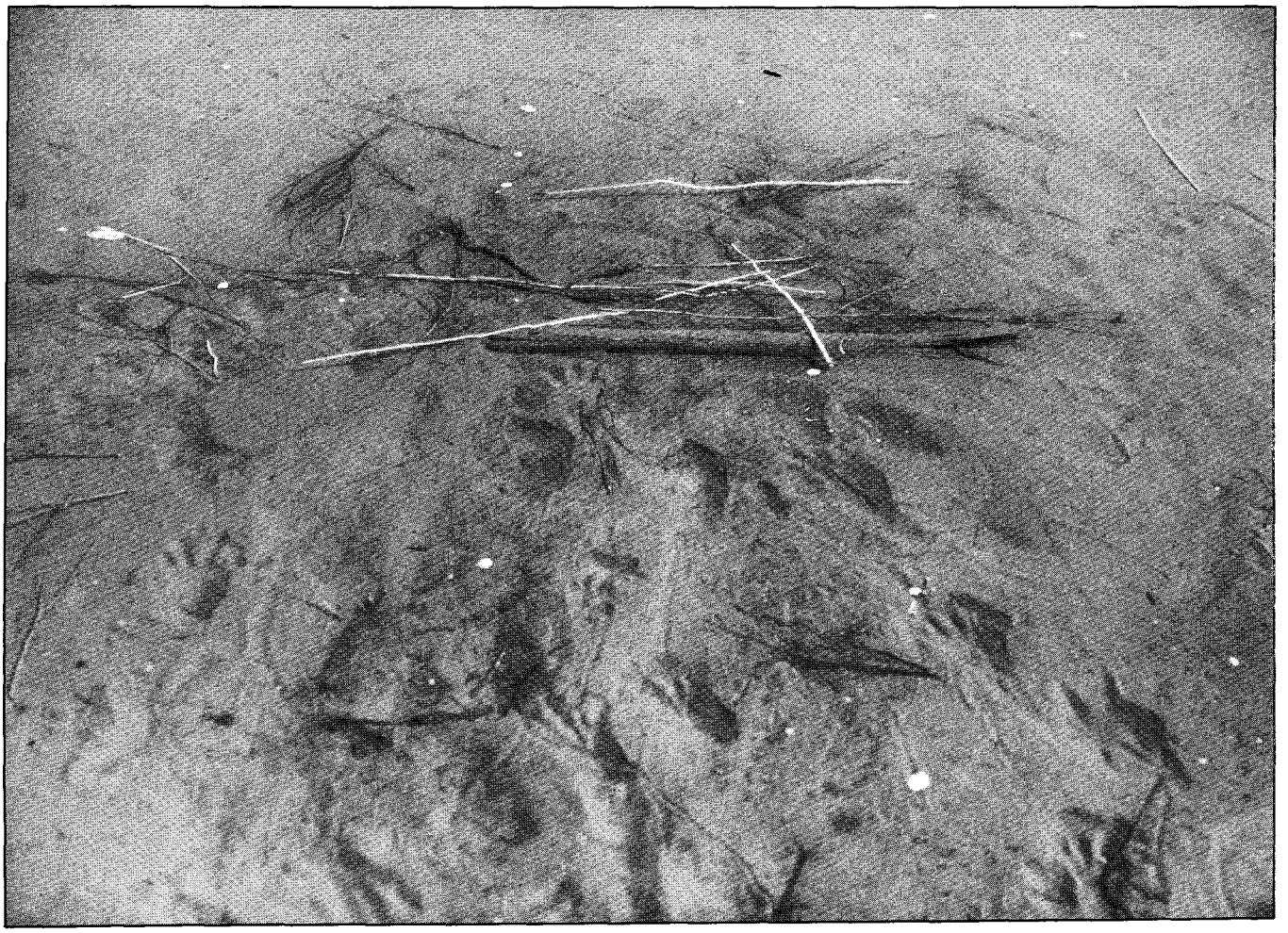

BEAVER STICKS

FOUR DAYS WALKING BY A RIVER FOUR NIGHTS CAMPING BESIDE THE WATER ALBERTA SPRING 1980

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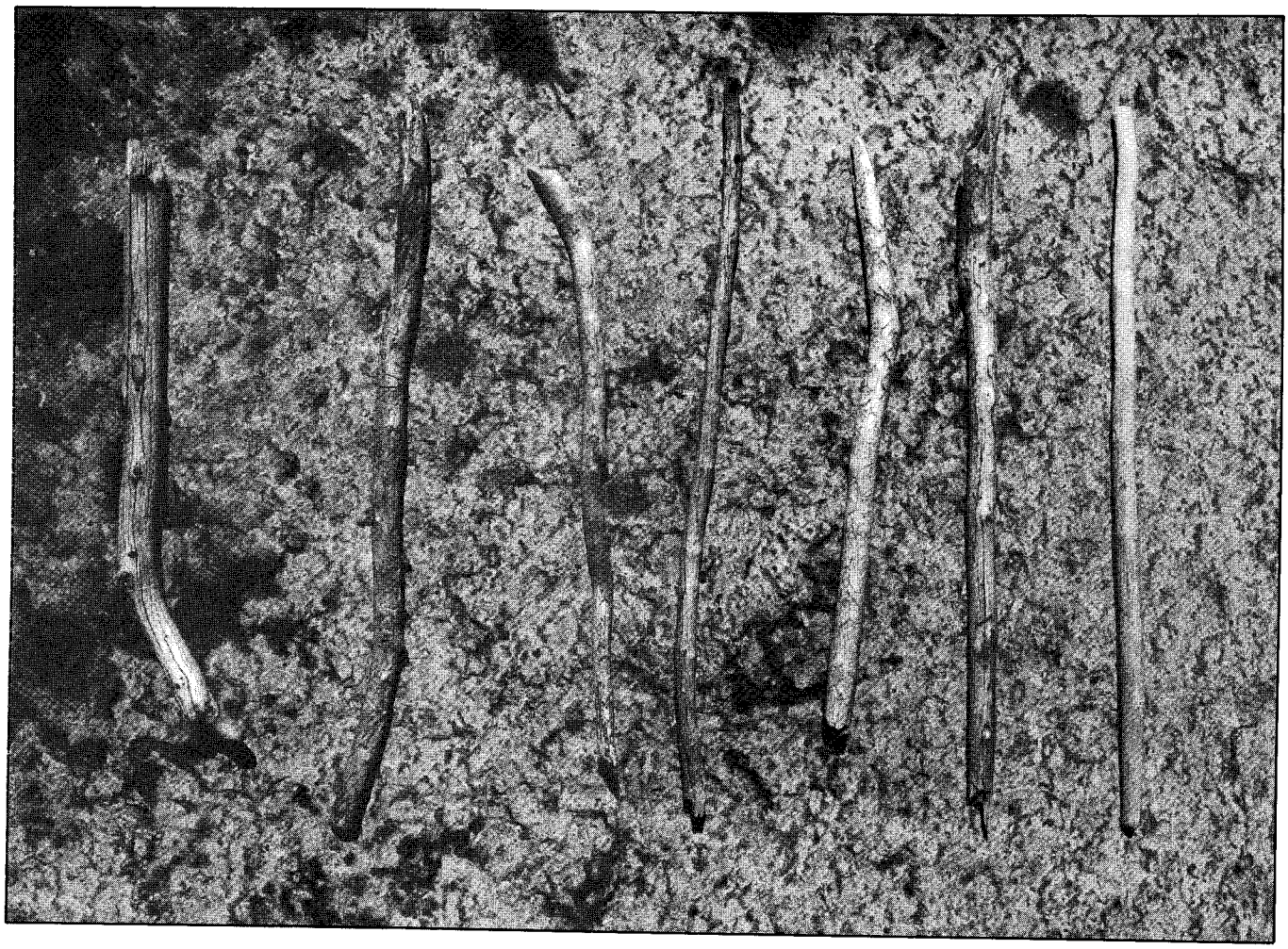

SEVEN DAYS

WHISTLING ELK A SEVEN DAY WALK IN THE ROCKY MOUNTAINS OF ALBERTA
AUTUMN 1978

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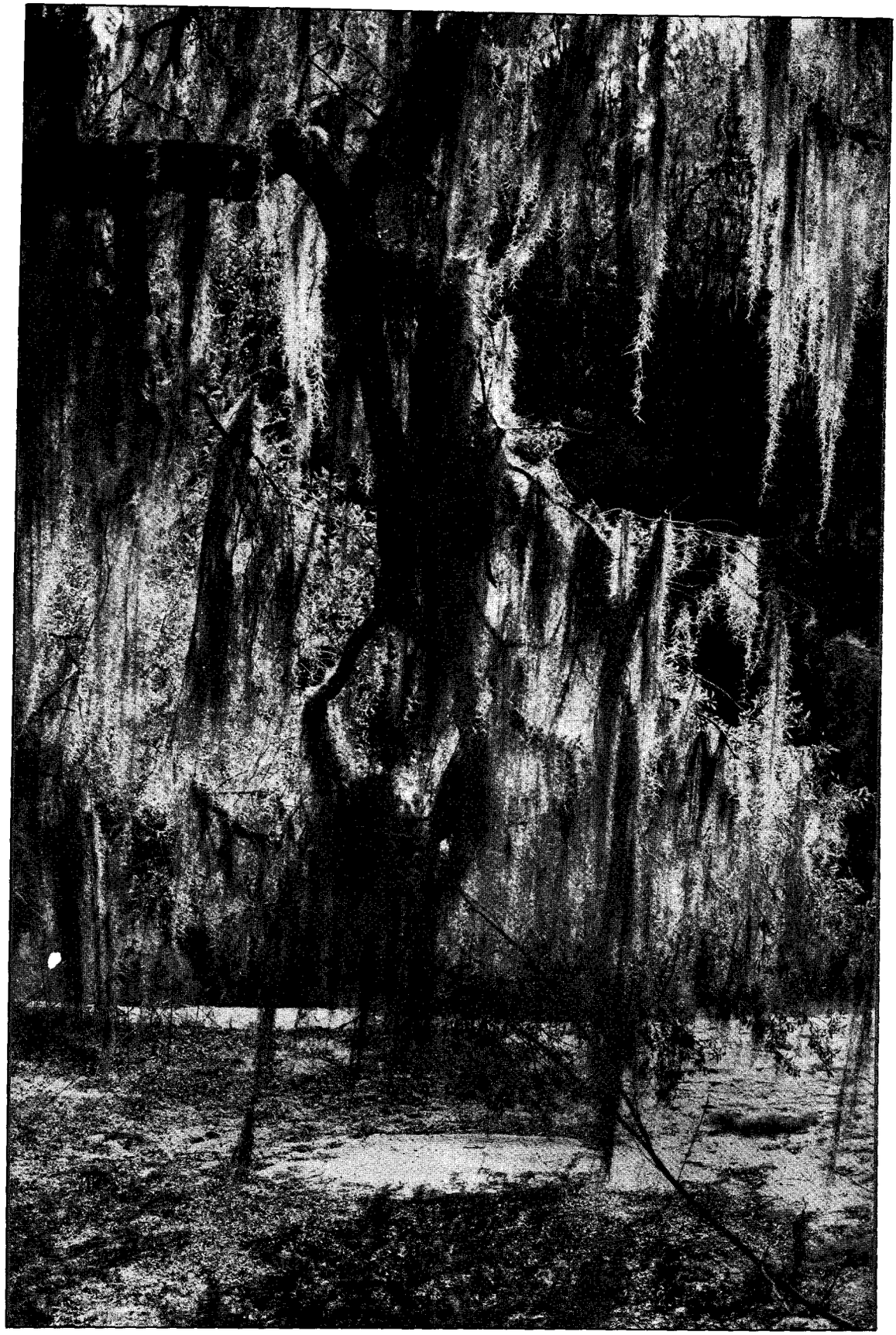

MOSS SWEPT CIRCLE

A SEVEN DAY WALK BY THE SUWANNEE RIVER
FLORIDA EARLY 1982

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JIM SIMMERMAN

HAGIOGRAPHY

"you have the feeling of sorrow
but not sorrow itself"–Ira Sadoff

ten feet closer
to nothing
the bibles are
still zipped tight
the faucet spits
prolifically
ice cubes melt
in shawls of dust
similarly
you occur
you sit in your body
astounded by teeth
by fingertips
by the shadow
cowering at your feet
for years
it has been like this
you and your body
two survivors
adrift
with provisions
for one
you have tried talking
things out
between yourself
making off
hand remarks
in the second person
you have tried to throttle
a wink
when everything failed
you stayed up late
picking splinters
from your heart
as one by one
your ribs disappeared
when the door
finally opens
like the lungs
of a drowning man
you walk out
on yourself
you stumble
past the footprints
scrawling from your porch
past the files
of bolted homes
and the river
abducting itself
for three days
you lie
in an open grave
watching clouds
blister and peel
when your hands
are clean
as unwritten scrolls
the rains
flush you up
you indulge
in contortions of guilt
confess
to a ruthless
dependence on water
and arson
to the recurring suspicion
that yes
you are a holy man
when a chorus of lights
does not ensue
you feel betrayed
you feel like
the last tool
of an extinct race
until it occurs
to you that this
is another way
of placing yourself
at the spine of things
that you are arbitrary
as any fact
that salvation
is a tuft of feathers
fluttering
from a barbed wire fence
you remove the feathers
fold them
in a silk scarf
press them to your chest
you bear yourself
home
only to find
the door open
the lock unchanged
beneath the porch
you discover
a cache of bones
you spend the day
whittling them
into straws
and when the sun
is tucked away
like a bright scarf
you dream
of yourself
as a statue
skating on the rim
of a whirlpool
waking
you weave the straws
into a nest
in which you lay
the parcel of feathers
you bury it
in your yard
sleep over it
now you dream you
are an eskimo
your family thinks
you dead
they bury you
in a block of ice
and push you out
to sea
you watch the backs
of their hoods
recede
like small suns
but waking
things are still
the same
the malleable ears
the snake sleeping
coiled inside your throat
looking back
you barely notice
the smell of
burning feathers
the ashes
on your tongue
your life begins
to crystalize
like the first
grain of salt
in the eye
of Lot's wife

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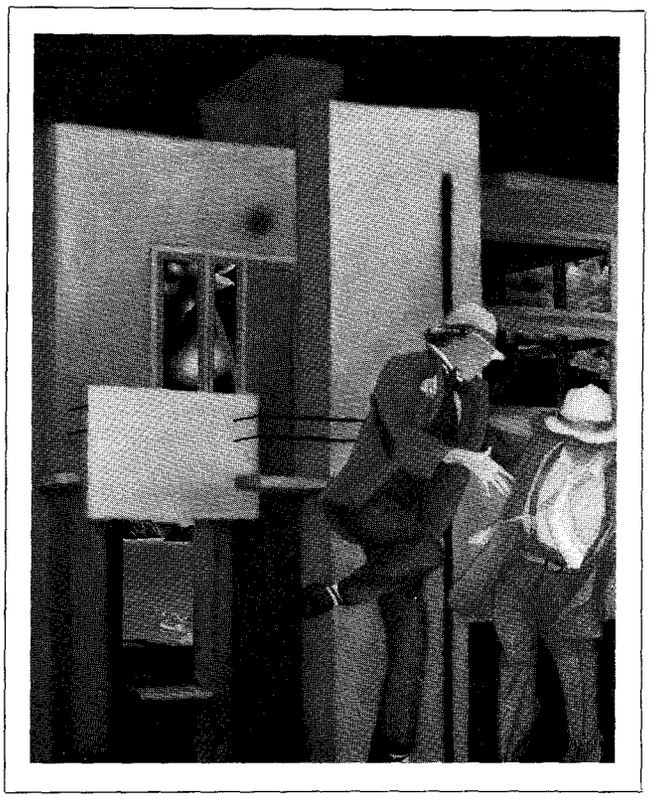
JACK THE GIANT KILLER

F.D. REEVE



From the bus approaching the airport, parked planes spread out like toys. Sean thought he could reach out and pick one up between his fingers, pinch its fuselage—'Broom, broom'—and deliver the money to his uncle without going through Customs. He wouldn't see anyone, and no one would see him.

He reached down to tie a shoelace. He imagined feeling the ten thousand pounds in the soles of his boots; he couldn't, but, as a general feels his stars, it made his feet heavy. They sweated from the idea of the illegal money, and his toes curled. If he tried to smuggle it in sewn into his pockets, it would burn holes.

One payday during the couple of months he had worked on the docks, he had taken home a brown envelope labeled T. McGrath & Co., deductions and taxes reckoned on the outside, inside more than two hundred seventy-five dollars in coins and crisp bills. He bought his mother some pink flowers; they were tall and smelled of honey. He stopped in a black-run liquor store where they wouldn't ask for his ID and bought his uncle a bottle of whisky. A whore called to him on the street; he remembered back to the girls in high school before he dropped out. He hadn't the time, he had told himself, but that day he believed himself in his dead father's place.

He didn't know what he should take his Irish uncle, so he had bought him a red wool necktie, a pair of leather gloves, and a bottle of whisky.

Nobody on the plane had hair as black as his. His mother said he had a lot of the gypsy in him; you find lots of black-haired people like that in Ireland, she said, on account of the Jews, too. She said his uncle was dark, too. She often said 'too.'

The stewardess had dark red hair the color of breadcrust. The girls at the ticket counter had bright red hair and green uniforms. They were living advertisements. He didn't mind sitting by the aisle: He couldn't see out the porthole, but he could watch the stewardesses' legs.

The money in his pocket wasn't the money in his shoes. Probably they'd look at his shoes first. His old boots— He'd probably trip on the hatchway, the sole would come off, and the Irish money would blow across the asphalt like paper napkins. Would he be shot by firing squad? His mother would talk about her son killed in Ireland, and girls would dream of having slept with him.

When they handed out landing cards, he followed instructions and falsely gave his address not as Uncle Pat's in Omagh but his other uncle's, his dead aunt Yvonne's husband, Kevin's, in Dungannon. That put him over the border.

Cap in hand, he buttoned his denim jacket and said good-by to the stewardess and stared at her breasts. He put his cap on and walked safely from the stairs to the terminal. His old, stained, orange pack arrived in the first load of luggage. The Customs officer, a woman, asked how much money he had—Sean felt his feet steaming—looked in the pack, and waved him through. Later, Sean said that the inspector had been a man with a moustache, that he had gone through Sean's pockets, and that you had to have luck to make it.

He could have taken a train to Collooney and Enniskillen, then on to Omagh. Before he left New York he was told that if he cleared Customs he was as good as home. Crossing the border is no trouble, they told him, especially for an American.

He didn't like being American. He didn't like being John Kelly. He didn't like being the smallest kid in his class. His name was Sean; he was Irish.

He hitched. With his pack he figured hitching would be natural. If he couldn't actually be Irish, maybe they'd take him for Dutch? or Danish? Trying to look like a blond Protestant and his whole family born Catholic back to Saint Patrick, practically: Crazy, man.

So, flashing his passport, unsearched, he crossed the border in a French truck, but he couldn't talk to the driver, so he almost missed his road when the driver turned left. He had to wave and shout to get him to stop. Then he crossed the Arney and Lough Erne to Enniskillen, but in Ballinamallard he couldn't get a ride. More than thirty miles to go. Late; few cars. You could tell by the way the Ulstermen drove as the light failed that nobody trusted anybody.

That's good, thought Sean. Proves the pressure works. And he mentally committed a terrorist act on behalf of the Catholic poor, dreaming he was Superman and Robin Hood in jeans with a moustache. He walked faster.

F.D. REEVE lives in New York City, teaches at Wesleyan University.

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The thatched roofs were stiff and silent behind thorn hedges. He could hear a cow move in a pasture or see a cat—or a rabbit—dart across the road up ahead. Tree toads and peepers in the bogs kept chirping. A late summer wind moved the leaves noisily enough to cover the sound of his footsteps, save when he caught a small stone or walked on loose gravel. He imagined the shadows were living men, but though they dipped in the breeze they didn't touch him. Some he walked right through. Then he got used to them. If he walked hard all night he'd make Omagh before dawn, he figured, and no one, really, would have seen him. If he was invisible, he must be traveling faster than light. He liked the idea; he laughed—the noise jarred the night, but the night swallowed it, and the sounds of the leaves didn't change. He became bolder.

He reached Trillick after midnight. Bright lights shone on buildings; lorries lumbered across intersections. As he cut past a tower in the corner of the market place, a policeman called to him. Or a soldier? A man with a gun. The barrel reflected light.

He slowed. His boots sucked the pavement as if gummed. His pack turned him into a hunchback.

"Papers!" the sentry demanded. Limey speech.

Sean waved his American passport, his magic wand.

The soldier trained a flashlight on it, then turned the light on Sean. The light hurt as it went up and down his body. The soldier called others over, showed off Sean with the flashlight, mocked his shabby clothes and his grease-stained pack.

"Comes from playing in shit when they're kiddies," the soldier said in a high voice, " 'cause they keep the cows and the chickens in them frigging little cottages, too."

"Look like cows," said another.

"Both ends the same," said a third.

Sean should have said something. The big boys always answered back.

"He's from the States. Can't you read his bloody passport?" asked a soldier hidden behind the light. "Where you going, laddie?"

If they thought he was getting fresh, they'd work him over, take off his boots.

Sean didn't quite remember. In high school, he'd lose count when he ran laps because he couldn't remember which one he was counting, the last or the next.

"My uncle's," he said.

"Where'd that be, boyo?" asked a heavy voice, mockingly Irish.

Under the waterfall, Sean imagined, at the end of the rainbow. "Beyond Aughree," he said, not sure where that was.

"You'll need a long thumb."

The passport came back out of the dark into the flashlight beam.

"Or good boots."

Laughter.

Sean's eyes darted from side to side trying to look around the light. The light didn't go to his boots. He reached out for his passport.

"Thanks," he said. It made no sense, but he'd be falsely polite, like with a salesclerk when he was covering for the gang, who were shoplifting something.

The questions stopped. He pocketed his passport and moved off into the dark. He walked as tall as he could, for he felt their eyes on him step, step, step.

Why hadn't they searched him? Were they stopping everybody? There wasn't anybody. He shouldn't be out? But he had no place to go. No place else. Be more careful. Avoid the town centers, the lights. Make no waves.

Shadows everywhere, but he wasn't going to turn them into men. A lorry rumbled on the other side of the houses beyond the square. When it came to the end of the street and turned left, he saw its headlights reflected in the windows. There were no animals—not even a high-stepping rat—then he remembered that if he were home he'd let the cat in before locking up for the night, and the old dog would come over out of habit. You shouldn't have a dog in the city.

When he looked up, the town was behind him; he was again in dark country shadows, under branches rocked by the wind. Trees creaked. Specters of noise filled his head; so, he began humming. He would become a shadow himself, he promised, and slip through the next town. He was dark to start with.

At Finrona he saw that the railroad tracks curved in below the road. The brightest lights he supposed the station. He took the first left, cutting away from the center as far as possible without getting into the fields or cow pastures where he'd trip over wire or muddy his feet or maybe even drop a boot in the mire. And being careful not to wake a dog.

A cock crowed off to the left, as if under his elbow, frightening him. The sky was still dark; what the hell? He looked at his watch; he couldn't read the dial. Indeed the sky was dark. Like everything in this country, the rooster was fucked up.

Sean wanted either to stand still and become invisible, like a rabbit in its form, or to run across the fields to his uncle's faster than a wolfhound, leaving everyone breathless.

He was glad he had on jeans and his denim jacket. The air had become cold.

What was that at the corner? What shadow? It moved irregularly on the paving stones, back and forth, unlike branches. Sean heard boot heels, voices. Scraping. Silence. The shadow lay there again, halfway into the intersection. Impossible to cross, like a swollen river. The night their gang had broken into the gas station on Tenth Avenue but fled when the alarm went off was like that, stealing back through the shadows on the sidewalk from doorway to doorway, around the loading platforms, panicking at the second or third intersection and running all the way home. The big boys had beaten him up for running back to his house; he never did it again.

He listened to the footsteps while watching the shadow lengthen then shrink, lengthen then shrink: A soldier, probably, on sentry duty. You couldn't pass. If you made a dash for it at the moment the soldier turned about, you wouldn't take three strides before he would hear you, wheel and fire. Your boots would make a terrible noise crossing the stones. And your pack was too heavy for

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you to really run. If you left it— No way. He squatted against the stuccoed wall to wait.

Back and forth went the steps; back and forth, the shadow. Each time it grew fainter Sean leaned forward, as if expecting it to vanish. Once, when the footsteps stopped, he stood up, took his cap off, and tried to peer around the corner, but as he was about to look, the steps began again.

His feet ached. He leaned back hard on his pack against the wall and slipped. The pack made a scratching sound. He caught himself with his hand, breathed heavily. The steps were coming closer—but they turned around and went away. Then they came back closer. The next time closer. And then still closer.

Sean crouched, elbow on the wall, breathing in and out with the footsteps. He cinched his pack tighter around his waist and tugged the shoulder straps. His shirt was warm and wet on his back. When the soldier turned, he'd pounce, slide his arm under the soldier's chin and squeeze, squeeze in, press with his knee. He had seen it on TV; he had seen the gang do it: The head would fall back; the arms would stiffen, flail, go limp; and the suffocated body would turn heavy; he'd let go, and it would crumple. Safe; he'd be safe. He'd run off. From the far side he'd look back and see the soldier lying there on the street like a dog hit by a car.

The footsteps back and forth. Why was it taking so long?

He imagined the left side of the soldier's face as the soldier walked toward him. He saw the soldier's ear. Judging from the shadow, the soldier had a round hat, a helmet perhaps. The soldier must be young and have blond hair at the nape of his neck. Sean listened to the stomp, click, step, stomp, click—About face! and imagined the right shoulder and the outline of the right ear under the hat receding into the light.

Nothing in his life had ever taken so long.

If he didn't get going, someone might jump him, or strike from the open side of the intersection. His foreleg cramped. He straightened up. His foot was asleep. Leaning on the wall, he moved his toes without moving his boot. The wall was cool. He laid his cheek on it and listened for the footsteps' reverberation.

Silence. He cocked his head. Silence everywhere. The same light. On the paving stones, no shadow that he could see, only the shadows of the stones. He turned his head to look back as far as he could: Nobody. Nobody that he could see. Had they gone? Were they playing a trick?

He leaned forward, as close to the very corner as he could. Far away he heard the footsteps. He said to himself, Certainly they were the same footsteps. Should he go straight across? Or pull to the far side, then dash ahead? He wished he could take off his boots the way he used to sneak past his mother and father's room. The stones wouldn't creak. He imagined the boots welded to his ankles. He listened. The footsteps seemed farther away. If he flew over in an airplane, or in a helicopter, his feet hanging down with his boots on, they couldn't touch him. That would be showing them.

He eased forward, foot and head around the corner simultaneously. He stopped. He drew a quick breath. He froze: Not ten feet from him stood a guard. Through his mind: There had been two; they had changed; he hadn't listened right. That's what they told him in school: "You haven't been listening." Over and over. "You're not paying attention." The bastards.

He dropped to his hands. He concentrated on the indentation of light under the guard's jaw above the collar and the sparkles on the end of his odd, thin rifle. That was no British soldier. Clothing too loose, stance too easy. Militiaman, must be. They had told him about that. Ulster Defense. Protestants. Shoot you in the back. Sean concentrated on the face, couldn't make it out against the light. He waited tensely, unconscious of himself, as on a lawn a cat flattens to spring on a bird, and only an occasional flick of his tail expresses his tension.

The militiaman looked up and down, shrugged his shoulders—perhaps adjusting his tunic, perhaps changing his mind. He gave a soft, watery cough, rounded his back, then straightened. Sean held tight, low. If he looks this way, Sean thought, but didn't finish his thought, held tighter. The militiaman turned the other way. In that instant, his eye fixed on the side of the face in the light, Sean pounced.

Light streaked by. The head began to turn back. The mouth opened. But Sean hooked the chin with his left arm, pressed his knee into the kidneys and bent the body backward into shadow. His cheek rubbed on the soldier's hat. He felt the arms flail, the fingers tug at his sleeves, but he locked his elbow round the throat and squeezed, squeezed in. He glimpsed the rifle on the ground, reflected in the light, but he didn't know how it had got there, he hadn't heard it fall. The soldier squirmed, grunted, tried to shake loose, kicked backward, tried to run. Sean leaned back, bent him back more. The soldier gasped, began moaning. Sean shut the soldier's mouth, clapped his hand over it. How easily done, he thought; how small they were, the mouth and chin. The soldier twisted, convulsed. The harder he struggled, the more desperately Sean squeezed.

A sudden snap, or crack, the sound Sean's Uncle Tim makes when he cracks his knuckles, but louder. The soldier shuddered and went limp. How light, Sean thought. How light the body on his arm. The soldier's head rolled back, his hat fell off; his hair spilled over Sean's arm. Dazed, scared then and haunted in the weeks without confession, Sean saw that the soldier was a girl.

Her hair, as red as the fox fur collar on his mother's coat, cascaded—

He let go of her like a— She dropped to the pavement. She— He fled.

He whispered to himself as he ran through the darkness, Don't matter if she did, don't matter now at all. And when he realized that he had the rifle in his left hand, no idea why, he dodged across the road and flung it in the ditch and ran faster.

He tried to shake her weight off his arm, to wipe her mouth off his palm, but she seemed to have stained his skin. In the light, he thought, he'd see marks on his hands, blood, where her lips had touched his palm.

Maybe he had only knocked her wind out. She might have gotten up now. The light. No time to go back. There

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might be soldiers now, perhaps an ambulance. Nobody knew anything. Nobody would remember. They'd send out search parties. They'd come looking for him with lights.

He was out of breath. His pack flopped at each stride. He slowed to a walk. He had to take a leak. He very much wanted to wash his hands.

How far to his uncle's? Omagh next. Avoid suspicion, wait until dawn. No lights then. They'd never find him without their lights.

Where the road crossed a culvert he slipped down the bank and into the pipe, almost dry, tall enough to stand in. He set his pack on the concrete, stepped out to urinate. His left arm seemed not to straighten from the pressure of her chin, and his right palm burned. He washed it in the little water that trickled through, rubbed it hard on the concrete as if to scrape it clean, but the impress wouldn't go away whether he opened his hand or made a tight fist. He splashed some warm, dirty water on his face and snorted at the smell. He hadn't shaved; he remembered her clear skin. Down under the middle of the road, he settled against his pack, his weight on the soles of his boots and his head against the concrete, but shutting his eyes made it worse: She came nearer, her profile in the light turning, staring at him, her mouth open. For the first time he saw her terrified eyes.

The rain began before dawn. He moved out early. A farmer gave him a ride part way in a cart. His poncho kept his upper body dry; his boots were waterproof; but his hair soon was plastered down, and the rain beat on his eyelids and seeped down his neck. Afterwards, walking, he detoured around the center of Omagh. Nobody bothered him.

Uncle Pat was wildly glad, laid the leather gloves on the mantel and draped the red tie round his neck. A small, wiry man, gray-haired now, red-cheeked, in the damp weather wearing a turtleneck jersey and baggy gray pants, he called the whisky "coals to Newcastle," as Sean expected, but opened it, poured each a shot. The whisky burned, stung, then suffused through Sean's chest and stomach. And with pride, as he told of his flight across, clearing Customs, hiking along the roads and staying clear of soldiers—he said nothing about the sentry—watching his uncle's approving eyes and drinking whisky in front of the coal fire, he felt he had done something special.

Uncle Pat slapped him on the back, said it was one thing to go to America to seek your fortune but another to come home as a man.

Sean beamed and took off his boots. He held them out to his uncle. "Maybe you'd dry these," he said, "in a special place?"

Pat hugged him, went to fetch slippers, saying that Sean must be tired and hungry. Tea right away, then Sean could sleep until supper. "Make yourself at home," he said. He went to put the kettle on, taking the boots with him.

When Sean awoke, the lamp was lit, and the fire burned low.

Next morning in the paper his uncle showed him an item headed UDR SOLDIER KILLED AND BOMB GANGS WRECK HOTELS:

> A part-time soldier was garrotted on sentry duty yesterday and five hotels were badly burned in Northern Ireland's worst day of violence since Easter.
>
> The soldier who died, Mr Patrick McLean, 23, was the sixth member of the locally recruited Ulster Defense Regiment to be killed by terrorists this year and the second from the Tyrone battalion.
>
> Mr McLean, a cemetery supervisor with Tyrone council, was married with one daughter aged a year and a half.
>
> Terrorists operating with the Provisional IRA are suspected of having been surprised in attempting to lay bombs at the Finrona police station after overpowering Mr McLean. No bombs were found, and Mr McLean's rifle was recovered a hundred yards from his body. No arrests have been made.
>
> Mr McLean joined the UDR in October 1973, three years after it was created.
>
> The hotel bombings . . .

They meant to trap him. Everybody did. His uncle, too.

"Didn't you come that way?" Uncle Pat asked. His hands on the table were thin, muscular, the kind Sean wanted to have. Sean nodded. "But you saw nothing?" Sean shook his head. "You know what bloody liars those bastards are?" Uncle Pat said without asking. "It was his wife stood in for him last night—'part-time soldier,' full-time bloody liar—and one of our boys made a mistake, and they're trying to cover up. Won't admit they posted a woman. Ah, it's a terrible, dirty war."

Sean shook his head, scarcely breathing, shaking with apprehension. "Maybe they didn't know," he said.

Uncle Pat shrugged. "And there's no police station there," he said. "It's on the edge of town. Indeed nobody can make out why she was there at all."

"Maybe that was a mistake, too," said Sean.

His uncle looked at him quizzically, then shook his head: "What would people in America think if they heard we were fighting women?"

"I don't know," said Sean, "after Vietnam."

"That was different," Uncle Pat said with a wave of disgust. "They weren't your kind. It was one thing in the old days," he explained—"You'd kill a man and know you had killed a giant, maybe, but now, killing a girl—that's all she was, the boys told me, a little slip of a thing—I don't know—"

Sean's chest ached, and his palm burned. Her eyes stared at him from the space around Uncle Pat. If she burst in through the door, Sean wouldn't have been surprised. He deserved hours, years of punishment for his sin. What did she want?

"A lad like yourself now," said Uncle Pat—"You want some more tea? —a lad like yourself in the old days, who can be counted on, would end up a giant killer for sure, like all those who served with Cuchulain." He smiled. "You're a fine lad, Sean. You're a man your father would be proud of."

Sean smiled hopelessly at Uncle Pat. He wondered what it would be like to have his arm on Uncle Pat's throat, squeezing, squeezing, pressing his knee into Pat's back, and if there'd be that same, sudden crack like Uncle Tim's knuckles, only louder—what was it? the neck? and if for the rest of his life Pat's eyes would stare at him, and what Uncle Pat's lips would be like on his palm. □

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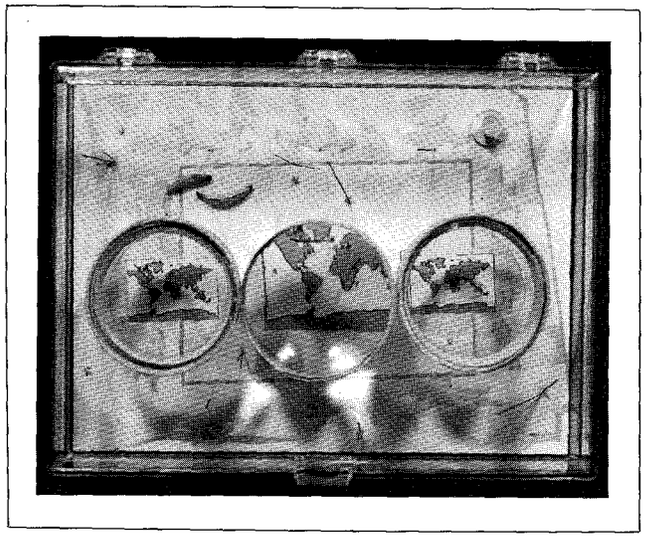
SAFE ENERGY

JANE NUDELMAN



Susan's house, a brown shingle cottage not seriously in disrepair, squats sleepily, its small windows like the half-closed eyes of some amphibian, in a tangle of uncared-for California garden.

Susan feels as if she's always lived there. She and her first husband rented it. Then, after their divorce, he bought it for her to live in with their daughter, Mariah. The year Susan lived with her second husband, she rented the cottage out to other people, and after that divorce, she and Mariah moved back to it. Her son Ben's father was happy to move in with her, winding his long legs around the narrow corners of the house for as long as he could stay, just long enough for Ben to be born.

Most of the time Susan's children have been growing up, Susan hasn't had a mate. But she's had the house, and she's grown attached to it. Sometimes when she's turning down the opportunity to go some place or do something Susan says, jokingly, that she is married to her house.

Mariah, grown now, lives in Berkeley where she goes to school. Susan occasionally visits her there. The hour's drive from Susan's house to Berkeley is filled with obstacles: driving in traffic on the freeway, crossing the long bridge; petty annoyances, perhaps, for someone else; for Susan, tests of nerve and will.

Susan will try to get to Berkeley at least an hour before she and Mariah are to meet. That way she has time to shake off the effects of the freeway, time to get used to being someplace vivid and complex. She will stroll on the campus, look at people, window-shop. Today, Susan parks on the residential north side, starts her walk from there. She admires old houses tucked away behind burgeoning gardens and notices the cats curled on porches or picking their confident way through foliage. She wonders in how many of these houses live women who hesitate to venture out.

Susan turns downhill toward an area of shops and restaurants. In the cluttered window of one tiny shop, she sees a yellow plastic hardhat with an iridescent circle at the front, a small propeller on the top; the hand-lettered sign says "solar hats."

"How much is the solar hat?" Susan calls from the open doorway. An untidy woman emerges from behind a curtain of lilac-colored beads.

"$12.95. When the sun hits the solar cell, the propeller spins around." She gets the hat out of the jumble in the window, puts it on, and steps outside into the light, facing the sun. The red propeller spins jauntily, making a playful, whirring sound.

"I'll take one, for my daughter," Susan explains.

The shopkeeper, a woman Susan's age, walks back into the dim shop, carrying the hat. Susan follows, idly wondering what this contemporary's life is like, what battles she has fought, what overcome, what magic she has used.

The shopkeeper arranges her book, her pen, the hat, on the counter. She begins writing up the sale, then stops and looks at Susan. "The man I've lived with all these years moved out," she says, "he took his kids. Now he's moving in again.

"I'm pregnant," she continues, "but not by him. I'm having an abortion, but I don't feel good about it. The only thing good about it is that the hospital I'm going to dilates you with seaweed."

"I don't know what to say," is Susan's hesitant response.

The woman puts her head to one side, regarding Susan. "I know," she says. "I told my friend upstairs who has the card shop. She said, 'Gwen, I don't have a card for this occasion.' "

Gwen hands Susan her package. "My life has always been a mess," she says contentedly.

Susan arrives early at the restaurant where she and Mariah are to meet. She chooses a table outside and orders a glass of wine. With interest, she observes the growing crowd of students, eating, talking, reading at the wooden tables: young people with the aspect of a dancing chorus, introductory and dazzling.

JANE NUDELMAN is in California, waiting for "something terrific" to happen.

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Mariah, tall and broad and slender, the image of her father, makes her way toward Susan. Her red-gold hair tumbles down her back, catching the light and attracting attention. Mariah talks about cutting it off. She says she doesn't like getting attention from people—from men—because of her hair. Susan has to be careful not to object, to remember that it's Mariah's hair, to remember that young women now aren't happy to be valued for their looks.

Mariah swings her book-filled backpack off her shoulder, settles herself onto the bench opposite Susan. Susan is glad to see that Mariah is remembering to carry the pack on one shoulder rather than on both. That way, as Susan has told her, no one can pull her over backwards. If someone should assault her by grabbing her backpack, she can simply let it drop and run away.

"Trouble at People's Park," Mariah reports. "An anti-draft demonstration. A die-in. Red paint splattered around. People lying on the ground, pretending to be dead. A big crowd, and the police. When I went by, a cop was reading the corpses their rights."

"And what were they doing?"

"Just lying there in the paint. They have to be told their rights before they're arrested."

"How come you were there?"

"I was walking by. I walk by there every day when I come to school." Mariah looks up; her face reflects immense annoyance.

"Why don't you walk some other way?" It is the history of People's Park that Susan is thinking of, the history of 'sixties violence.

"Walking around the other way, I'd probably get raped," Mariah answers.

"I wish you wouldn't hang around where there's trouble."

"Mother," Mariah raises her voice, "I was not hanging around. I was walking by."

"So were those kids at Kent State," Susan says resentfully, "walking by."

There is silence. A confrontation. They stare at one another and don't speak. Mariah is the first to look away. "Why do you always do this to me, Mother?"

"Do what to you?"

"Try to keep me from getting hurt?"

It's a good question. Susan can't answer it. She should long ago have learned not to do it, not to try. Trying to keep her kids from getting hurt has involved Susan over and over again in work she didn't want to do, in responsibilities she could scarcely bear to have.

"You did things," Mariah accuses, "you worked against the war."

"That's ancient history."

"You marched with the migrant workers."

"Mariah, that was different, almost everybody marching was a nun."

Mariah persists, "Then what about your anti-nuclear group?"

"Fear," confesses Susan, "all done because of fear." Something in Susan has resisted telling Mariah this. Now she's said it aloud, she feels enormously relieved.

"Well I know *that*," Mariah says.

Proboscis is the word that John, the guest, uses on Saturday night, sitting in the living room with Susan, ten-year-old Ben, and the dog; with candles and firelight and rain hitting softly on the overgrown grass and the tangled greenery outside. Proboscis, as if it were an ordinary word. "I wore a gas mask," he says, "and I altered the hose in front so that it was protruding and scary, more of a proboscis."

The dog, a spaniel, yawns, and Ben makes a pile of the pillows on the floor and stretches out on them. "I dressed all in black," John continues, "and I had this plastic spray can filled with water."

Susan nods. Ben's eyes close, and the dog shifts closer to him. John continues. "I labeled the bottle *radiation*, and I threatened people with it." He stands up, then sinks into a half-kneeling crouch, hunching his shoulders, holding his hands out toward Susan, threatening her with an imaginary bottle filled with water and labeled *radiation*.

Susan draws back. She can see how alarmed she would have felt at the rally if he had approached her, dressed in black, wearing a gas mask, carrying that bottle.

"See," John says, "you didn't like it. That's the way everyone felt. I mean, they knew it was acting, they knew it was water, but they would shield themselves with their hands and turn away.

"I sprayed them anyway," he says. "I mean, that was the point. I wanted them to get the point." John pauses. "But I always told them afterwards, 'it's water, man, just water.' I shouldn't have," he says, "that took away from the effect.

"Guerrilla theater," John explains, "better than just talking all the time."

Susan stills feels repelled by the mimeographed proposal she is holding which reads, "three lines of three women each, keening, and calling, 'bring out your dead.' "

"I can see your point," Susan says, "but this embarrasses me. And I don't think it would work, anyway."

John shrugs. "You may be right," he says.

They both stare into the dying fire. You can talk politics for just so long.

Susan's idea of satisfying political action is far different from all of this. When she takes the dog for her walk, they go up above Susan's house to a woodsy, open space—sixty acres that used to be a grand estate, where nothing's left but scrub and a few sad traces of the formal gardens. Up there, the dog is venturesome and fleet, and Susan herself feels plucky marching up and down the gentle hills, noticing with pleasure black branches curving up against the sky, small flowering weeds, the smell of skunk, a gray deer standing in the scrub.

Some builder has bought it all and has staked out half-acre lots for homes. This intrusion, this staking-out, the pouring of foundations, the framing so far of two houses, the sounds of machinery coming from up there, all have served to remind Susan how precious her daily walks are, how short-lived her pleasure in them will be.

When she takes the dog on a walk and they pass the house where the carpenters are working, and she sees the blond carpenter, the stocky one with the beard and the

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long hair and the blue cotton scarf tied around his head, the one who drives the pickup with a bumper sticker on it that says *split wood not atoms*, Susan waves to him, points to the truck as she walks by, calls "right on!", sees him flash her back the peace sign or a smile. That's Susan's idea of satisfying political action.

Susan and John fall asleep in front of the fire, on either side of Ben and the dog. Later, when the dog is restless, Susan gets up stiffly, lets her out, notices with sleepy pleasure how the low fog clings to the shapes of shrubs and bushes in the tumbled yard.

Susan covers Ben, then John, with faded cotton quilts. Feeling along the walls, she makes her way to her bedroom, undresses, and curls up on one side of the double bed. She is wide awake. She thinks about John, spraying people, waving a proboscis at them. This makes her smile. The thing that has brought Susan and John together and has held them is their mutual disinterest in sex.

Just as Susan is falling back to sleep, Ben comes to her open door. "Mom," he says, "I had a bad dream." He sits down on the empty side of the bed, pulls his knees up to his chest. Susan turns on the bedside lamp. He's fallen asleep in his clothing and is still wearing it, looking dirty and uncomfortable. Susan remembers how scrupulous she was, when the children were small, about bathing them before bed, about fresh pajamas, those soft ones with feet, with animals running around all over them, with bottoms that snapped securely onto the tops.

"You look so uncomfortable, in your clothes," Susan says.

"I am." Ben struggles out of his corduroy pants, pulls off his socks, throws them across the room. "I had another really scary dream."

"Tell me about it."

"Well, for one thing, I got killed in it again."

Susan and Ben have talked about this before. He dreams often of dying or of being killed. Susan had thought that people woke up from bad dreams right before they died, just in time. But Ben doesn't. No matter how frightened he is, he dreams on until the end.

Susan tries not to let Ben know how much his dreams of dying frighten her, how much it worries her for him to be able to dream himself dead, how it brings to her mind all her fears for her children, about them dying: about Mariah being murdered in her apartment in Berkeley, about Ben being hit by a car on his way to school, about either of them getting sick, about them being burnt to the bone in a nuclear war.

"Tell me about your dream," she says calmly.

Ben's bad dreams always reflect their talk, hers and Mariah's, hers and John's, their pessimistic, circular, political talk. Sometimes Susan is afraid that it is all this talk that is most dangerous to Ben. Sometimes she thinks it is she who may damage him by frightening him and causing him to worry, by making him feel helpless and vulnerable, with her talk about radiation and chemical poisons and the deprivation of whomever's rights; her talk about war. Perhaps what really is unsafe for Ben, what really deprives him of his child's rights to optimism and sweet dreams, is not the true state of things, but all her talk about it.

In Ben's dream, he has been hunted, cornered, killed. When he finishes telling Susan this, he slides down until his head rests on the empty pillow. "Goodnight Mom," he says.

She turns off the light and waits until she's sure he's sleeping. Then she gets up and goes to sleep on the couch in the living room.

Sunday morning, Susan is awakened by Ben and John in the kitchen, fixing breakfast and talking. Ben says, "If I was the guy who pushes the button, I'd say I'd do it, but I wouldn't."

"Why not?" asks John.

"Because pushing it would kill all the Russians."

"Well, what if they were attacking us?"

"I wouldn't push it," Ben says, "I wouldn't push it, period."

"Probably you won't have that job anyway," says John.

"No," agrees Ben, "I'm gonna be a rock star."

Before she comes into the kitchen, Susan writes down on a three by five card what she's heard Ben say, puts the card into his folder. If Ben can prove he's been a pacifist for seven years, he'll have an easier time getting classified as a conscientious objector—if there's a draft, if the laws don't change, and if Ben doesn't change his mind.

Susan and John are supposed to be at the shopping center at noon, to meet other people there from their safe energy group. Susan believes that a political group, like a family, sinks to the level of the most uncertain, and people in this group, she feels, have not been artful enough in hiding their discouragement from one another. She's sure that none of the others will show up, that she and John and Ben will have to give performances of the puppet show, hand out literature, and ask for signatures on petitions all by themselves.

Dreading the afternoon, Susan finds it hard to get ready. John has loaded his van and has told her to hurry, but she is standing in her underwear, not able to decide what clothes to put on. She feels she should make some special effort to look ordinary and respectable, the way she imagines people all look in shopping malls, the way she imagines she doesn't look.

"Time to go," John calls. He comes to her bedroom door. "Not ready yet?"

"I don't know what to wear. What should I wear?"

"Put on your jeans," John says, "and hurry up."

Susan reaches for her jeans, the ones she wore the night before. As she does, she sees herself reflected in the full-length mirror, looking every bit her age. She finds this reassuring: no matter how she dresses, no one is going to mistake her for some radical kid.

The shopping center has provided for them—would provide for anyone—a long table, folding chairs set up in rows. John and Ben put up the painted plywood theater, vanish behind it with the bag of puppets. Susan, putting informational literature out onto the table, weighting it down with small, smooth stones, can hear them giggling.

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One of the puppets—the pink bunny—appears on stage. Ben makes it wave to Susan and say to a passer-by, "Hey mister, whatcha doin'?" in a bunny voice.

Little kids, kids who are used to sitting down and watching, soon are on the chairs, in their jackets, looking at each other, at the stage. Some of their mothers sit with them. Others hurry away, pointing to Macy's or to Newberry's. "I'll be right in there," they say loudly, for Susan's benefit, "you stay here and watch 'til I get back."

Susan sits down behind the table. From there, she can see the stage, the children's backs. She wonders when the mothers will come back for their kids, whether they'll be willing to talk with her about energy when they do. She wonders what the children will understand of the puppet show, whether there will be nightmares.

The indistinct tape with its tinny-sounding Mary Poppins music starts. John's fake funny voice introduces the show. The children wriggle, briefly watch the puppets cavorting on the stage, turn on their knees to peer at kids sitting behind them. The mothers stare into the distance and finger the bright clasps on their purses. At the climax of the show, when the terrified pink rabbit cries out, "It's the Energy Dragon!", Susan is relieved to see that nobody in the audience is listening.

Midweek, Mariah comes home. "Rest and recreation, mental health time," she explains. Her unexpected being home is deeply sweet to Susan, satisfying in the same nostalgic way faint sounds of silverware and dishes coming from the neighbors' kitchens on warm evenings are.

"Nuclear holocaust," Mariah says, complacent, making tea. "There's sure to be a war." She suggests they emigrate, to New Zealand, where they'll have a chance. "Southern hemisphere," she explains, "prevailing winds."

"Unthinkable," Susan argues amiably, meaning war, New Zealand, both.

Mariah doesn't try to force conclusions, wanders off, leaves Susan sitting with the empty cups to wonder what there is for dinner, whether there's a chance New Zealand would be spared.

Ben and Mariah cook dinner while Susan reads out loud from The World Book, Volume N. "Sheep," she reads, "thrive on New Zealand's fertile plains."

When she finishes reading about New Zealand, Susan goes on to Newfoundland; then she skims the entry on Sir Isaac Newton. After they eat, the three of them play poker, using m&m's for chips. Then Mariah and Ben go to bed and Susan locks up the house and turns off the lights.

She walks through the small rooms, touching the smooth surfaces of things with her fingertips. Everything outside lies still beneath the white light of the fullest moon, and the overgrown shrubs at the windows appear against that light as intricate silhouettes. With both children home and safely sleeping, Susan feels released, contented and bountiful, free to be not-afraid, to drift, to think of other things. What she thinks about is the carpenter: the wide stance, the pale beard, the curving lower back; the convex thrust of his hard stomach as he stands astride the frame of some unfinished house. □

SUE OWEN

THE PROPHECY OF INK

The night has provided
enough ink to write,
so I must write.

I write to this hour
and its traveling minutes.
I make an address to
the infinity in my clock.

I write to this chair
that never woke up
from its perpetual dream.
In it, it holds my weight.

To this patient table
that feels my thoughts
written upon it, I write.
I write as a bird can
write only to sky.

I write to this breath
of air that was just mine.
I am writing my blood's
best farewell to this
paper, even to this pen.

Then I must write to what
I have already written.
I will say to it:

These words possessed me.
Ink was only the shadow
of what I meant to say.
In the life that comes,
this darkness stays.

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WILLIAM PAGE

DUST

To these slate painted windows
I come back where I learned,
to these smells of wet cement and urine,
the bricks and glass of public schools.
I return for the lost sake of those who taught,
for the long division of now and then,
and for the swing hung in the sun
while a child ran under, shouting
the now forgotten name. I come
to leave the cotton from these knickers,
to call back the names of faithful teaching
matrons, of skinny spinsters, and widows—all
who gave me their brothers lost in the Argonne,
who told the story of the Hindenburg aflame,
and explained how the many small numbers
could be made into the large one.
I render unto Caesar and the seasons
or whoever will listen: the Mississippi,
the Nile, and the Aegean.
I recite the capitals of the states
and spell the seaports of the world.
Then this paltry list of facts
I buckle up with my strap
and leave it for what it was.
I hold between my fingers
these once millions of tiny creatures
who memorialized *their* teacher
the buxom sea by dying into chalk.
I write in bold white letters
my own three names and each teacher's
erotic title I can remember,
and the rest I consign to dust.

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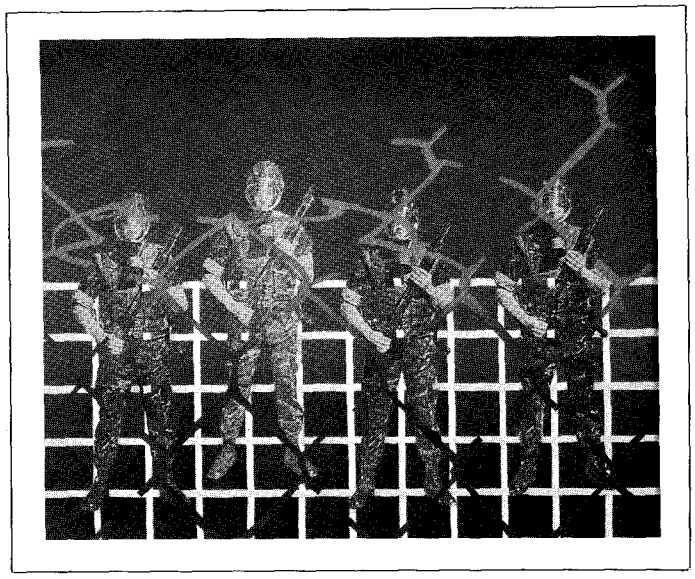
WAR GAMES

ANTHONY CAPUTI



"I can't believe this is happening," we kept saying. She the wife of the notorious professor who looked like Trotsky, I with Mary and the children in our house in the suburbs. It was the war, of course, and the endless rain and raw winds and the stories that the rebels would reach the city in a few days. Forty miles away for three months! The people hardly knew what flag to show or what party button to wear. And there we were, in our forties, falling in love. Meeting at a reception over sherry and biscuits, talking near the gray painting of the city fathers, like missionaries back for a convention, grasping at each other's hand on the stairs and kissing hotly on the landing in view of the bank president's wife. Like the cheapest romantic novel. This couldn't be happening to me! To us!

We were in love! Despite the curfew and the cars with loudspeakers trumpeting announcements about victory and heroics at the front, the squads of white-helmeted military policemen examining papers, and the stories of murder and disappearances. The city was within a hairsbreadth of panic, and we were falling over each other to get into bed, laughing like children at the sag in our slightly worn bodies, happy. I didn't go home for a week, and only then to pick up my things, I who had never so much as pinched a secretary at a Christmas party. But the die was cast.

We settled into her place as if her husband had died, could not come back, had no right to come back, even though his books and pipes and photographs with political and literary personages were everywhere. I kept turning the pictures face down, and she laughed, though she insisted, and I believed her, that she was very fond of him and had never been unfaithful before. I had seen him on television, in political debates, tough-minded, precise of speech, a young old man. She had been his student, and with something of the same incisiveness she could spin out arguments, non-stop, through six cigarettes, sitting cross-legged on the bed, naked, swinging her black hair forward over her shoulders as she ducked her head sharply for emphasis, but then stopping and waiting as if apologizing that she had talked so long. I rarely discussed these matters with her: I had never been political in the sense that I had taken sides. I had read and watched and tended my flowers in the suburbs. But in her presence politics became sexual; everything she did and said excited and pleased me.

We had no sense of the future, of what would happen if the rebels did reach the city and her husband came out. We understood, I think, that she would leave him, but we didn't discuss it. We lived as if all the rules that mattered in the world had been voided. What remained was inauthentic, worth attention only because it provided a structure for us as a couple, or a scaffolding where a structure should be. Lord knows, we didn't think about it much. We were in love. Good God, in love!

Then she was arrested.

One afternoon I came back to her place as usual, and, finding her out, poured a drink and turned on the news to hear about the latest exploits at the front, still forty miles away. Six o'clock. Seven. Eight. At eight-thirty I called one of her colleagues in the History Department, someone she had mentioned but whom I had never met; and though at first he fell silent and, when I insisted, cleared his throat and went silent again (I practically had to tell him we were living together, and that seemed to reassure and, oddly enough, to please him), he finally blurted out that she had been arrested. Two political policemen in plain clothes had eased into her office and whisked her away so rapidly that only the secretary who had seen the same thing happen to her famous husband had noticed what was happening.

I knew the rest. I saw the scene even before I had put the phone down. Margot surrounded by guards with fixed bayonets marching her through the shabby corridors of the House on Winter Street. A scene out of all the spy and foreign intrigue movies I had ever seen, the remoteness of

ANTHONY CAPUTI teaches at Cornell University.

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all those Saturday afternoons watching bargain double features instead of playing soccer pressing in on the glass in my hand and the fierce taste of whisky neat. The House on Winter Street was notorious. People crossed the street to avoid passing too close and averted their eyes from the blanked windows like so many blinded eyes as if even that contagion were perilous. People kept disappearing into it, most of them cranks with an obnoxious habit of litanizing clichés, but now Margot.

It was my cue to run, back to the suburbs and the azaleas. My wife would cry and then forget; the children would be happy. But I went to Winter Street, though I knew it wouldn't be any good. And, in fact, I didn't get beyond a small man with large, flat cheeks that ran like thick pancakes over onto the black lapels of his uniform. He said almost nothing, and I see now that he was more interested in me than in anything I wanted to know. Finally I asked if there was anything I could do? "Anything." The word crackled in my throat, melodramatic, like the vast waiting hall with noisy metal chairs in no order at all and the guards with machine pistols. But he seemed almost relieved to be able to respond, "I leave that to you. When you have decided, come back." As if he had been waiting to get to that point all along.

On the sidewalk across the street I took in for the first time how big it was—a long double block down Winter Street and almost as much in depth. And it all seemed closed, abandoned, except for the entrance through the heavy metal gates with guards in long black raincoats, directing cars and closed vans up a long narrow driveway to a hidden interior. No sign. No lights. No vehicles parked at the curb. Nothing but a vast sooty wall of gray windows.

I walked the length of Winter Street for the rest of the day, pausing across from the gate, stopping at the tram stop at the far end to watch people getting on and off trams, going into a bar at the other end of St. John's Square for a sausage, roll, and beer, and twice for coffee. It was to be my post for weeks. I had to watch the cars and vans leaving the narrow driveway, even though I sometimes could not see into them or they would catch me in the bar with a coffee; I had to know if she came out through the iron gates. One day I thought she did, and I ran for two blocks, losing my hat and splashing through the puddles, to draw up to a woman of Margot's size and shape and wearing a fitted black coat exactly like hers and look into severe green eyes pinched in suspicion. But mostly the gates remained closed, or the figures to emerge were soldiers, or, at any rate, men, or, if women, clearly not Margot.

It was all I could think to do. I stopped going to the bank. For the first few days I called in and told them I was running a fever (the truth), then I gave it up. What could it matter? I would go back later, or to another bank; cities always need bank officials. I sent my wife most of what remained of my savings, knowing that in two weeks that would be gone, but I couldn't think about that either. Margot was in there, and she didn't come out.

After two days I realized I wasn't alone: others also came to pace, or to stand against one of the deserted warehouses across the street, or to linger in the steamy bar, sipping drinks at the window that looked up Winter Street. They drifted up and down like ghosts. When I passed close to the man in the light brown hat, sharp lines tightened around his eyes and the vaguely distinguished figure recoiled just a touch. A woman in a large loose coat with a heavy scarf over her head walked without stopping for three days then on the fourth took up a position across from the iron gates and simply stood in the rain. When I walked past, she was weeping out of control.

The others did much the same, walking briskly from one shelter to the next, or to the old man selling chestnuts from a hissing brazier under a striped beach umbrella, rarely speaking to each other, sometimes disappearing themselves after a few days. The rain fell, riddling the huge puddles as if the heavens, too, were weeping out of control. The rebels were now thirty miles away. Like a clearing deep in a forest, the street harbored an intense life, once you developed the eyes to see it.

It had been raining so long that it seemed at the wettest and coldest moments like the end of the world as we know it. First your ankles got wet from the splashing, then your teeth chattered and your shoulders grew damp. At last you stood in one place to keep the streamlets from running down your neck and slowly stiffened in fingers, wrists, toes, and feet, until you finally bolted for the bar and a coffee at the cloudy window. After three days of this I threw all dandified habits to the wind and began dressing like a soldier in the line. Double socks, sweaters, scarf around my head under my hat, my heavy coat. I tried to keep my eyes on the gates and panicked when I lost contact because I had to use the bathroom or order a sandwich. When cars or vans would go out that I could not see into, I would wait ten minutes and then call the apartment. But she was never there.

In the bar the faces of the regulars grew familiar. Men and women in late middle age mostly, parents and spouses with nothing else or nothing more important to do. They rarely spoke. They would come into the bar and look at everyone, then order a coffee, or smoke, standing apart, with their eyes passing through and over everything to the street beyond. Or they would stand in the rain, like a ragged chorus that never sang, hands pushed deep into pockets, heads drawn inside scarves and large hats. If, in the bar, someone called out for change for the telephone or the cigarette machine, someone always quickly supplied what was needed. But both would look past each other to the street, through the impossible haze and rain.

One day a man in a long, heavy coat who wore a cap that he slapped against his hip as he came in the door came straight toward me at the bar and asked if I would buy him a sandwich and coffee.

"I came away without any money. I'll do the same for you tomorrow." His speech was crisp and cultivated, and his eyes flashed intelligence and perhaps even wit under eyebrows black where his long straight hair was lank and silver gray. He had been a lawyer, he explained, and then a judge under the previous régime, now in retirement for more than ten years. It was mad that he should stand out in this rain, at his age, but there was nothing for it. He couldn't bear to stay at home and watch his wife looking up the front walk by the hour.

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"Besides, I'm even worse than she is. He's my only son, and I'd really rather be here than at home. It won't do any good—I know them. But I feel near to him." His eyelids fluttered sadly, and he loosened his scarf as he settled down to wait for his sandwich. When he had finished, we left the bar together, then separated to hold our private vigils.

His name was Mesta, and in the days that followed we spent time together every day. He pointed out the most veteran of the other regulars. The little fat woman who carried a plastic shopping bag with dry scarves and gloves, sandwiches and a thermos of coffee. Her husband had been inside for two months, yet she hadn't received the notice that he had been convicted and sent to a camp, or, as often happened, that he had died. The tall, handsome woman who wore too few clothes to walk in the wintry rain, in her early thirties, with long, delicate features and a pallor heightened by her melancholy; her husband, too, had been arrested. The little old man in the cape who sat in the corner and frequently wept. He was waiting for his grandson. All his children had been killed, in the army or in raids, and this last grandson had been arrested throwing garbage at the flag. The old man laughed when he told the story, then the tears turned to weeping. Mesta knew about everyone, even the old man who sold chestnuts under the striped umbrella. He had appeared two years before, and when he had had the letter telling him that his son had died in prison, he had set up the charcoal brazier and gone into business. Even the young man with the hound's tooth coat and glasses: Mesta suspected that he was a spy.

The first week passed with no sign. I gave no end of thought and worry to the fact that for all legal, official purposes I had no connection with Margot. No one would call or write to me, not unless Margot told them to and she probably would not to avoid implicating me. Thus the tenacity of my vigil: it was really all I could do. In that first week, moreover, I was convinced she would be released. So she was an intellectual! So she could be critical of the régime! They must see that she was not part of a subversive organization! Certainly the régime had far more serious enemies to worry about than cheerful Margot.

One day I told Mesta that I had no official connection with Margot, and we discussed ways of establishing one. He knew certain names and features of the command within the Political Police and suggested who might be contacted and what might be said. But he had so little faith that any effort would be worth it that we gradually drifted from that to the riskier, probably more effective possibilities of bribery. It could be done, he was sure; yes, he was sure it could and had been done. But the only justification for the dangers would be release. "I'm sure it has been done." He spoke evenly and softly, looking around to see that we were not being overheard.

It was clear from our discussions through the next few days that he had thought of bribery before. It would take the right contact, someone highly enough placed to be able to manage a release, yet someone who could be contacted directly, without the intercession of a second or third party. He knew a certain Marmo. He had been a policeman years before, a chief of detectives who had passed quite normally into the political arm when the régime had taken over. "Not a bad man," Mesta recalled, "though I never knew him really well. And he was young then." Or there was a quite highly placed official who had been a lawyer when Mesta was serving as judge, a man named Bo; Mesta had known him rather well, but had heard that he had become fanatical in his present duties.

We discussed the merits of each of these possibilities at great length. How to make the contact? How to broach the favor? How to raise the question of money? And how much? It might be better, Mesta would conclude in exhaustion, if he avoided the issue of money altogether and simply traded on his former reputation. But he could do that for himself—not for me. And even then he was afraid, terrified that a breath in the wrong place might work his son still further harm. He would push the empty coffee cup away, his eyes suddenly vacant, young with innocence.

How had all this happened? he would ask, standing then sitting down again, to postpone going out. He had been a lawyer and a judge under a government sick with problems. Everyone knew it was sick: they said so every day. And he, as a judge, had practised the approximate art of justice, perpetuating no more than the least of standards, minimal behavior, and reluctant to demand more. "Now we have a generation of visionaries. They know everything, understand everything, insist on everything. To doubt, to feel ambiguity, is as unpatriotic as to have a contrary opinion. We are caught up in an orgy of certainty. Tell me, how did they become so confident? Where did they get their arrogance? And believe me, they are not the only ones: the rebels are as bad, or worse."

He would lean forward as he said this, his eyes clear and his features tensed, as I imagined he had often looked across his bench at convicted prisoners, and then would go on with a quiet bitterness to tell how his son was actually innocent. It was grotesque. His son had been arrested for editing a subversive magazine ("Have you heard of *Bunker Hill?*"); apparently someone who had made a full confession had identified the editor by the name "Mesta." "But," and here he always laughed drily, "it was really my brother they wanted. He's the radical in the family. My son has never done anything more political than paint watercolors. But what can we do now? How clear up so hideous an error, especially when we have to do with men who do not make errors and have no sense of humor? How?"

These conversations were the intervals between the long hours in the rain. And there were others, with the other "watchers," as we called ourselves, and other stories. The young man in the smart hound's tooth coat and heavy glasses—I decided that Mesta had been wrong and that he was not a spy. He had a younger brother inside, a reckless idealist, he admitted, but a child. Only seventeen, he had not yet found political connections, and, lacking them, he had printed his own broadsides, handwritten and mimeographed, then stuffed them in mailboxes in the suburb where they lived. It was a joke, the young man protested, removing his sodden hat and running his palm over his prematurely bald head. "No one took him seriously, except them."

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The tall, pale young woman who dressed too lightly and trembled as she sat waiting for her tea had been arrested with her husband and later had been released when it was learned she was a foreigner. She sat idly, with careless, unconscious grace, her long legs sharply outlined against her wet coat and skirt, her eyes cloudy with fear; she spoke with a fruity southern accent. She had been an actress and her husband a director, and for some years they had run an experimental theatre which occasionally, she admitted, touched on political matters, but was not really political. She groaned, almost sensually, as she insisted on this last point, tired and bored at having to make it again. Their fault, really, was that they were experimental. They questioned assumptions. But, good heavens, they were artists! Has no one in this country ever heard of artists? As to politics, it would be difficult to find a more indifferent political person than her husband.

Of course I listened to each of them with great interest and compassion, but the truth is they only aggravated my anxiety. No one came out. Of all the watchers I met and listened to or heard about from others, none ever showed up in triumph to say his or her brother or husband or son was going to be released. Some of the watchers disappeared, gave up, or were themselves arrested, and some persisted in the cold and rain and hopelessness of the time to dash from shelter to shelter and to pace the sodden street, oblivious to the world crumbling and dissolving around them, to stumble into the bar, stupefied. But no one in the House on Winter Street came out. Two weeks now.

One day I mentioned to the young man in the hound's tooth coat my speculations about bribing someone. He looked at me with pity. "The worst mistake you can make is to trust one of them. Get that possibility out of your head and think about this." His eyes narrowed and the soft, pink skin on his cheek tightened. Then he set forth his step-by-step plan for a commando assault. Trucks crashing through the main gate. Hooded commandos inside armed with light machine guns. Shoot everyone. No mercy. Free the prisoners! Set the building afire! It was magnificent and mad; I realized how mad when I learned that he had recruited only three besides himself, and one possible. I would make a fourth, or a fifth. He wanted to meet me the next day, and tried to, but I avoided him. There was no time to lose.

Evenings I went back to Margot's apartment and ate from cans and watched the news and replays of old propaganda films. The apartment had not been cleaned in nearly three weeks. Occasionally I would look around at the filth and confusion and wonder how this could have happened. But I did nothing. What did it matter? The news was so like what it had been four, six, and eight weeks before that they could have been playing tapes for all I knew. Late at night I would look through drawers and packing cases hoping to find another photograph or something she had written, something through which to feel her vitality. I was forgetting. The rain was washing me clean.

Finally, I went again to the House on Winter Street, to the guards at the gate and the barn-like waiting room with dilapidated metal chairs and the small man with thick cheeks sliding down over his collars, and I told him about Mesta's brother, how he was really the subversive they wanted, not the boy, how he would lead them to a network. Of course I bargained. For all this I wanted Margot's release. But he succeeded in getting me to tell everything I knew before he made any firm promises. He was almost excited at first. He sat forward in his chair, and his flat blue eyes flashed a splinter of light. "Yes, yes; of course," he reassured me when I turned the discussion to Margot, and he held his palm up as if stopping oncoming traffic. Then finally he scuffled from the small office to leave me alone for a long time to meditate my mistakes. When he returned, his expression was again that of doughy lethargy. He was sorry but there was nothing he could do. The higher-ups didn't think the information was worth very much. When I asked why—was Margot all right? was it the boy? what, for God's sake?—he shook his head dully. I came away certain that either Margot or the boy had been "justiced," as the régime was fond of saying.

After that I was very sick. That night I drank a great deal and got very drunk, then I didn't recover from the hangover. My extreme delicacy the next morning led to a fever by evening and a roaring, partly delirious fever by the next morning. For several days I thought I was going to die. Fever and chills and a headache to drive anyone mad. I drank tea, when I was strong enough to stand up and make it, and ate crusts of bread that hurt my gums to chew. During one day I thought on and off of suicide—the gas in the kitchen—but it would be my luck to have Margot come home and find me.

I must have slept a long time, a sleep like a marathon movie. Mary and the children were there, younger, and we were trying to put out a fire in the basement of a house not our own. Then Margot and her husband carrying a bloody ax came in and together we hacked away at the basement stairs as if removing them would prevent the fire from coming up into the house. But Margot and I sneaked off before the stairway was down and set out in a small boat in a storm. It was mad. A storm, a shipwreck, a long swim to an island while holding hands. Marriage before a brown-skinned native priest. As I embraced her, losing myself in the thick garlands of tropical flowers over her shoulders and in her hair, a thousand churchbells began ringing and I woke up.

The room shook with the sound of bells and horns and voices. At the window I could see people walking fast, embracing each other, shouting. The rebels had entered the city and the régime had fled. It was over! The dragon was dead!

I pulled on my clothes and, forgetting my heavy weather gear, started across the city in the light rain to Winter Street. At the first corner I had to lean briefly against a building, dizzy, still feeble from the fever and many days in bed. But the soft rain, warmer than it had been, revived me, and I started out again, running and walking by turns, pushing past jubilant men and women who tried to embrace me, through a mob of students moving in a disorderly serpent down the street.

On Winter Street a city bus was burning, abandoned against a wall, and the street was slick with sodden papers,

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records, dossiers, reports, some with identification photographs and closely written paragraphs, others typed or printed. The large black gates stood open and many windows along the first floor had been broken or their blinds hung askew. But there were few people. Whatever had happened there was finished: the police, the assaulters—they had all gone leaving the huge building exposed like an open cabinet with its contents spilling to the floor.

I went up the narrow driveway, entered by the small door that led to the narrow reception room, and passed into the vast waiting room. Silence, cavernous. Hundreds of rusting metal chairs were scattered everywhere, overturned, pushed into heaps. I picked my way to the corridor which led to the little office where I had talked to the small man with the fleshy cheeks and blank blue eyes; it was empty except for the desk with a chair on its side on top of it. Further into the building more offices, more waiting rooms, all empty and in disorder, floors covered with papers and broken furniture.

Still further on the building at last opened into large warehouse rooms, great spaces filled with crates of records which reached almost to the steel ceiling beams, then smaller boxes with pharmaceutical trade marks, then huge rooms of sand in piles and immeasurable quantities of steel bars and plates and wire mesh and copper tubes. It was a labyrinth: vast room after vast room storing immense quantities of almost everything. Tinned food, clothes, raw grain, what looked like miles of chains of all sizes, and everywhere records, writings, notations, the detritus of a civilization.

For a long time I saw no one. The hollow emptiness of the ceilings reverberated a silence of deserts and lost mountain valleys. Then I caught sight of a little old man sitting on a crate marked "aspirin," weeping. It was the old man whose grandson had been arrested for throwing garbage at the flag. Then I saw others, wraith-like figures walking slowly through the huge rooms like mourners looking for a grave. The tall actress stood disconsolately in the middle of a large open space, sneezing and blowing her nose discreetly. A young man I had never seen in a uniform I had never seen (a rebel?) walked past without even noticing me, his face white with shock and fatigue. Seated in a folding metal chair in the middle of an open space where coal had been stored I found Mesta. His black brows drooped, and his gray hair was a spikey mat. He looked up at me and said only: "There are no cells."

I went on. The next room, like a soccer field, was also empty, but as I reached the center I heard a low bubbling sound, soft, purling, musical. And in the next room I found enormous tanks of water, five feet high, each the length and breadth of a small city square. Alongside were wooden staircases with little platforms at the top, and from these I could see that the tanks were packed with fish, millions of small fish flashing, probing the surface with their round mouths. They could have been trout, sleek, silent, delicately turned. They probed the surface and flashed in groups, darting, darting, innumerable. I called out, involuntarily, to resist somehow. But I couldn't hear my voice. Only bubbling. An urgent gurgling. The waters churned with fishy life. □

VAN K. BROCK

FROM THE NAZI POEMS

HITLER

"Bastard," they called me.
"Be a clerk," Papa said. Often,
He gave me hard blows for my good.
"Love-child," Mama said, "*Liebkind,*
Whatever you do, it's you."
I tried several shapes, then played
A desperate people. My baton
Was *Nothung,* Siegfried's sword,
Forged in the loins that gendered
Luther. I played Wagner, he me;
Moving through his arias, I fed
On the Volk-heart, it on mine.
Life against law. My needle stitched
Il Papa's lips. We understood
The Same Power—Me. Better a silent
Vatican than none, eh, Pius?
I cast an eye on his galleries
And tightened his barbed stitches.
He would have had to grunt out
My last rites had I repented
And not cut off my own thing.
We told him I was the Nordic Christ.
I freed the gold from the dark mouth,
Woke the blond North and wed her
With a smoke-ring, thus, filling
My emptiness. "Goebbels," I said,
"The gullet that swallowed Borgias,
Medicis and inquisitors can eat us."
I made my pyre: the Jews, Germany.
Eva came too. With Blondi, my dog,
We entered the cave, the capital
Of the Thousand Year Reich
Burning above us. My best work.
Blondi swallowed a capsule, and when
It worked, Eva and I bit together,
As I shot myself. Now,
The last rites: here are my balls
And blood. "Rip your stitches out,
Papa. Kneel. Eat, Papa."

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DAVID GROFF

THE SADDLE RIVER

Like that pipe spilling something black
through the woods to the Saddle River
I was the smell in the weeds that crept
beneath our foundation, I seeped through the walls
of the church I sat in dozens of Sundays asking
if Jesus did it too, or the organist, or my father.
I hated how my father's clear blue eyes
met my mother's, and the simple way he'd ask at night
what I'd done with myself that day.

God! The breasts that shook the whole way through the park,
the corduroy knee I touched in a movie,
and years the dream where we swam by that pipe,
those girls and me—drowning, repenting everything,
flinging our arms out, out
to whatever it was that was clean and could save us.

Tonight the air clears. The speaking fades in the other houses,
the lights go off, and it's so cold by the river
the grass crackles when I walk through it.
I'm surrounded by all those summer bodies,
the women whose legs stretch out on the picnic tables,
wet and bare, the dogs who pull themselves
on their stomachs over the moist lawn and no one minds.
I've seen how in the spring when it rains the water
folds itself over and stirs like a woman waking,
how the river smoothes its oil into the grass.
Now, in the cold, in the dark,
with my eyes closed, I can find the old places
where the weeds still smell to heaven;
but tonight I can see to the current
where always under the ragged oil
fish touch, find each other, part, touch.

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The Madonna of Red Hook

When my Aunt Mimi heard what I wanted to be she begged me not to do it. The whole family was at her house in Shaker Heights for Uncle Ed's birthday. I was in my last year of medical school then and had stopped in town on my way East for residency interviews. Aunt Mimi grabbed my arm. Aunt Mimi squeezed. Chocolate layer cake and neapolitan ice cream nearly spilled from my paper plate onto wall-to-wall carpet.

"Don't do it!" she said. "It's a terrible business!"

"What do you mean?" I said.

"They're . . . they're a bunch of quacks. And worse. Why don't you do something real, like your father?"

All around us cousins and uncles were eating chocolate layer cake and neapolitan ice cream. I sipped Hawaiian Punch. I tried to think of a way to explain how bored I was by internal medicine, my father's field, and how psychiatry seemed to offer so much more . . . more *what* I didn't exactly know—but Aunt Mimi had already turned to my little sister, to find how basketball practice was going, and my answer was forgotten.

The question, however, was repeated a number of times in the next few months. My Endocrinology instructor tormented me with it. "I hear you're planning to throw away your medical education," he said. And when in one consultation I suggested that the patient see a psychiatrist, he personally tore my note out of the chart, and had my Resident write a new one.

And, that December, after I finished the application process and was waiting to be accepted, I was accosted at a party by a stooped, vaguely clerical man, who said he was a psychiatrist—a psychoanalyst.

"I hear you want to be a psychiatrist," he said. "Well, if you're looking for a quiet, comfortable life, don't do it. Forget it. Do something else." He looked at me gloomily. "Why do you want to do it?"

But before I could answer, the evening was over.

I spent that winter trying to make up my mind. Was I going to follow my father into internal medicine, which required sacrifice and dedication? Or was I going to veer into the thickets of psychiatry, and spend all my time with crazies?

And so, two years later, there I was, sitting in conference with other psychiatry residents and medical students and social workers and nurses and our professor, Dr. Valtin, listening to the presentation of a new patient, and wondering why the decision had been so quick, whether it was only the reaction of an oppositional nature, or if there was more to it.

My medical student Ellen was presenting. She was curly-headed and enthusiastic about seeing as many patients as she could—she was applying to my program—and every time she spoke I was tempted to shout at her, "Don't do it!"

"Mrs. Racusi is a twenty-nine year old married secretary who delivered a baby son by caesarean section three days prior to admission, and who became psychotic the next day. She has no previous psychiatric history. After she was brought home she became agitated and put her arm through a window . . . "

Mrs. Racusi's madness was a Brooklyn madness, a low-voltage affair of scrambled thoughts and mutterings and half-hearted impulses to suicide, all flavored with paranoia; it was not one of those electrifying, soul-shaking, wrist-slashing, overdosing Manhattan insanities which threaten spontaneous combustion of the crazy one and dozens of innocent bystanders, and could snarl traffic for hours. Mrs. Racusi would not even have come to our unit, in fact, if not for the accident of a window coming between her fist and the phantom face of her sister-in-law Donna Marie.

So I sat back as Ellen talked, wondering if Aunt Mimi was right. Perhaps there was more to her warning than I had realized; perhaps the fate of sitting in a room listening to a floor of misery and pain was a terrible one for a boy from Cleveland Heights; perhaps I should have figured this before it was too late. One thing was becoming apparent after some months of inpatient psychiatry—that our planet was overrun with craziness and anguish (at least in the vicinity of Manhattan), that the world's only unlimited resource was human pain. And not only that, but to sit immobile for hour after hour, listening, was to be blamed for what the world had inflicted, to have your very soul scorched. And to be reminded time after time how much could not be done.

They brought her into conference mad. She was mumbling to the walls, a shuffling woman with ashen Mediterranean skin and hair glinty and glittery as coal, bodiless and tangled, and a belly still so big that her shirt rode up over it and she had not been able to snap her jeans shut. Her face, a madonna's round face, was void of tenderness.

"Sit down, Mrs. Racusi," said Dr. Valtin.

She stared at Valtin a moment, sat gingerly, surveyed us in horror, stood, began to talk, sat down, reached for the bandage on her arm, picked idly, said the name Donna Maria, asked if any of us had a joint.

"I've heard a little about you," said Dr. Valtin. "But perhaps you could tell us in your own words . . ."

Awed, she watched him, as if bugs were crawling from his mouth. She giggled. Clearly she was undermedicated, this madonna from Red Hook, Brooklyn, secretary on maternity leave, madwoman. Poor grooming, inappropriate affect, hallucinations; an embarrassment to the unit, a disturbance to other patients. Well anyway, in a few weeks we'd have her saturated with medications and back to her walkup apartment.

"I saw Donna Marie in the window, I wanted to punch her, she wants to take my baby away, she's my husband's sister and she thinks she can take my baby . . . and I want my baby back because she's going to drown him in the bathtub and then she'll laugh . . . I heard her say she was going to do it . . . can I leave? I don't want to talk about it anymore, I

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just want to go home . . . why can't I go home?"

"Where's the baby?" asked Dr. Valtin after she left.

"At the sister-in-law's."

"It's all right?"

Ellen nodded.

"This is the biggest problem in post-partum reactions," said Dr. Valtin. "Infanticide. There's a very high risk. People don't want to hear about it, but it's real, it happens." He sighed. "It's true these psychotic reactions are not usually schizophrenic in origin, that they're usually from an underlying manic-depressive illness. But they're much more difficult to treat. It's often a year or more before they resolve. What have you got her on?"

"Lithium and Prolixin."

"I would certainly go up on the antipsychotic medication," said Dr. Valtin.

After conference, Ellen walked down the hall with me.

"It's really interesting," she said. "Don't you think? I'm having the whole family come in today, so I can find out what really happened with Donna Marie."

"That's fine," I said. "But, like Valtin said, she needs more meds."

I went to my office, which was on the unit, between the rooms of two patients. After four months here I still had nothing on the walls, and only a few books. My desk was covered, though, with memos, forms to fill out, stacks of xeroxed articles, including a manila folder from Dr. Valtin—the literature on post-partum reactions, biologic and analytic. I paged through it. What could it tell me about this woman, a secretary, high school graduate, wife, a decent, unexceptional woman? Why was she here? And why so sick? What was it about childbirth that made the illness so much worse? I read. The analysts had something to say, psychobiologists a little more. But none could provide answers, none seemed to do much other than hint at solutions; then they became cloudy, formulaic. To step beyond the visible seemed to lead nowhere. There were no unruly clones of cells, no viruses, no miscoded proteins, not yet anyway, and it seemed there was no likelihood of any being found for a long time.

Someone next door was banging on the wall. I looked around. It was all yellowed by tobacco smoke, and on one wall a green metal cabinet hung, from the days when medications were kept here. The room seemed filled with the reverberations of strange voices, recountings of precipitous declines, the reliving of protracted family quarrels, confessions of odd and impulsive acts, the residues of discarded rationalizations: it was a room which seemed to taint anything brought into it, so I wanted nothing of my own here. Yet the time I spent here—listening, dictating, dialing the phone to reach psychiatrists in their country houses, patients' families in New Jersey—that time could seem endless, the room could seem to have an existence only in relation to madness and to nothing else; there could seem to be nothing outside.

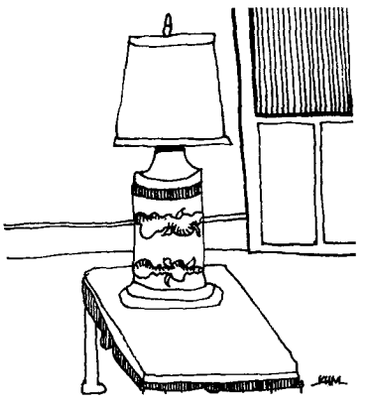
The curtain on the door was pulled aside—someone was looking. I went to the door.

"Doctor? Is this the right day to see you?" It was Mrs. Greenstone, who was getting shock treatments for depression and was confused.

"No, tomorrow," I said.

"Oh, oh I'm sorry, doctor. What day is it?"

I told her; she wandered off down the hall.



Dr. Kane came in. He was a surgeon at another hospital, who had met a beautiful deranged woman at a bad time in his life, and overdosed when she got tired of him. He was blond, heavy-set as a plumber, and he hated shrinks.

"When are you going to let me out of this damn place?" he said. He leaned forward in his chair. "You're a real son of a bitch, you know that?"

He was gone soon, back to his ruptured appendixes and cancerous stomachs, and Ellen left too, after just a month on the unit, undiminished in her enthusiasm for finding out everything about her patients (but unfortunately not for writing it in the chart), and Mrs. Greenstone got most of her memory back and returned to Riverdale. But Mrs. Racusi stayed.

The trees in the courtyard before the hospital lost their leaves and the ground became packed by rain. Behind the building the river was discolored as an old pipe. The unit filled with people for whom Thanksgiving had been too much and the approach of Christmas and New Year's brought thoughts of jumping and slashing. I silver-taped my window to stop the draft from killing my plants.

And Mrs. Racusi spent her days in bed. I'd write an appointment time on the bulletin board and wait in my office for her to come in; but most of the time I'd have to walk all the way around the floor to her room, and knock on the door, and go in, where I'd find her lying fully dressed in bed, asleep.

"Come on, it's time to meet."

"Oh, I'm sorry, doctor," she'd say. "I'll be there."

I'd walk the long corridor back to my office, and wait. Finally she would arrive, with bright splotches of lipstick smeared over her mouth and eyeshadows making coal-smudges of her eyes.

"So what's up?"

"I want to go home to Red Hook. I want to see my baby."

"We'll have him come here," I said. "Soon."

"I don't want to see him *here*, not with all these crazy people."

"That's the way we have to do it."

She giggled.

I asked what it was.

"I want a joint. Do you think if I gave you five dollars you could get me a joint? I'd do anything to have some Thai stick." She rambled on. Out the window I could see the gray tower of the main hospital, the bare tops of trees, cabs lined up to get back to the avenue. Mrs. Racusi was better than when she came in, but not much. If we cut the Prolixin back too much she became crazy again, if we increased the dose then she spent the whole day in bed. And as far as I could tell the Lithium wasn't doing a damn thing. How much easier it was in the main hospital, where you drew blood and scheduled x-rays and didn't have to listen. On Obstetrics it had been even better: the women came in big-bellied, dilated, contracting, they'd walk up and down the corridors in their bathrobes and slippers,

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trying to convince gravity to do the work of time; nothing would happen, you'd wait forever, you and the Resident would go to bed on cots in rumbling, shaking internal rooms, and hours would pass, until suddenly you'd be awoken by the nurses and run down the tiled halls to find everything ready, the waters broken, sometimes the head crowning out, and you'd guide what nature began, finding a gray-blue warm creature that seemed drowned, entirely dead, but would start moving, shudder, breathe and in a few minutes be pink, crying, alive, being wrapped in a blanket off to the side as you remembered to pull the veiny cord so the placenta, like some weird sea-fruit, splashed into a metal pan. Then you'd clamp and cut the cord, and the wrapped baby would be laid on the mother's breast, and it would be as if you'd accomplished something extraordinary, and of course you had. But this . . . here the waiting produced no miraculous existence, no transfiguration, no event.

"When can I go home?" she said.

"When do you think?"

They brought the baby in on a snowy day, by car service from Brooklyn. Dr. Valtin insisted that everything be arranged in advance, so she would be observed at all times, not disturbed by other patients, and so the visit would not last too long. Her husband Sal and his sullen henna-haired sister Donna Marie were in the room when I came by, standing over the bed. The baby lay there on his back. He was in a snowsuit, pink, gurgling. Donna Marie was doing something right. And way over by the window, her back to everyone, arms limp at her sides, stood Mrs. Racusi.

"She don't want to touch him, doctor," said Sal. "She played with him for a minute and that was it. Now she says take him back to Brooklyn."

"How come?"

"She says . . ."

"I don't want him!" she said. "Donna Marie wants him, she can keep him. So take him away, okay? I don't want him."

They took him away, but the next day he was back, and this time she held him stiffly on her thigh, almost all the way to her knee, and looked away into space as she fed him. She held the bottle on the level rather than above his head, so mostly he swallowed air. The nurse would tilt the bottle up, but if you came back a few minutes later there it would be, level again.

But she pulled together. She got it in her mind that she wanted to be out for the holidays, so if there was any way to speed things up . . .

We got a crib from Pediatrics, a big thing with black rubber wheels and metal-barred sides that slid up and down, and the baby began to spend the night. The nurses checked up on them a few times an hour, she began holding him better, talking to him, changing diapers. Everyone was impressed how she'd improved.

"So what's the plan?" Dr. Valtin asked one afternoon.

"We're going to discharge her in about a week. She'll have the baby, she'll be going to the Day Hospital in Brooklyn, she'll continue her medication . . ."

"Has she said anything about hurting the baby?"

"No."

"Even any suggestion? Anything that would indicate she was defending against impulses to . . ."

"No!" I was annoyed. Why did Dr. Valtin always harp on that same issue? Faulty mothering and murderous wishes and secret infanticide—didn't we get the idea already? What were we supposed to do about it?

"Well, all we can do is worry."

When the family came—a week before Christmas—we filled the river lounge with chairs. All the Racusis were there, Sal in his silver leather jacket, Donna Marie in a fur coat and with the baby on her hip, two pudgy sisters, old Mrs. Racusi who was all grays and blacks, and *her* family, the Altanos, were there too—her mother, her wizened step-father, her brother Danny and his wife. Mrs. Racusi sat in an armchair, looking at the floor.

"Well, let's start," said Jeanne, the social worker.

"I got something to say," said Danny Altano.

"Can you wait a few minutes? I want to make sure that everyone's . . ."

"No, I ain't going to wait. What I want to know is how come Donna Marie's been doing all this shit with the baby—I mean, my sister's been right all along—Donna Marie *does* want to take that baby for herself, and she's doing everything she can to keep it."

"That's bullshit," said Donna Marie.

"No it isn't," said Danny's wife.

"Yes it is," said Donna Marie. "I been staying up all night taking care of that baby and now she's going to get it back—and I'm *still* willing to help with the baby if she needs help, and I haven't seen you around once, and I don't care if you live in Fort Lee, you could still do something."

"We are going to do something. When she don't want the baby, when she wants a rest, *we'll* take the baby, okay? We don't want your help anymore, okay?"

"Oh yeah? Where you been? Where you been all these months?"

Then they all started in. It was the Racusis against the Altanos at first, then it was Mrs. Altano against her son Danny, and then Donna Marie started shouting at *her* mother, and the two pudgy sisters started crying, and Sal Racusi walked out of the room and had to be brought back by Donna Marie and the two of them stood outside the room yelling at each other and all the other ones stood in a group yelling at Jeanne and me, and Jeanne and I said everything we could think of to bring some order and shut up when the screaming continued anyway; and then I just watched Mrs. Racusi, dark, plump in her sack dress, the baby now flopped over her, face in her breast, and behind everything, out the dusty windows the icy rolling river and, above, the gray cumulus atmosphere of winter.

"We're going to sign her out of the hospital right now!" Danny Altano screamed. "This fucking place only makes her sicker!"

She and the baby sat still.

A few days later she went home. They filled a bunch of cardboard boxes with her clothes and the baby's things and diapers and magazines and plastic bottles of lotion and get well cards and baby cards, and they put the baby in a snowsuit and wrapped him in a blanket and Mrs. Racusi in a winter coat that scarcely buttoned over her belly, and they took her down to the car service car and drove her back to Red Hook. A schizophrenic got her room; the baby crib was moved out in the hall to be returned to Pediatrics, and somebody strung red and green crepe paper through its metal bars.

There was a long weekend for Christmas and a long weekend for New Year's coming up, and the week between everybody was angry. The

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aides tried to get out early; the nurses said no one ever listened to them; we residents complained that the administration had no idea what long hours we had to work; and overdoses and wrist-slashers flooded the Emergency Room, trying to get into the hospital which alone could save them from themselves; and all the patients inside complained that we were keeping them against their will, that there was nothing wrong with them except the depressing atmosphere of the ward, and threatened to sign out or run away. In short, things were going smoothly.

That Wednesday the head nurse paged me out of Grand Rounds.

"You've got an admission," she said.

"What do you mean? I'm not up."

"It's your little friend."

"My friend?"

"Racusi."

"You're kidding. What happened?"

"Oh, she stopped taking her meds—her husband didn't think she needed them. Then he had a Christmas party for her and she got stoned and started acting a little funny and the next thing you know they found her out on the fire escape with the baby."

"Jesus," I said.

"You sound so surprised," she said.

"I'm going to kill Donna Marie. Stick an icepick in her face. And twist it around. Hello, doctor," said Mrs. Racusi when I came in. She smiled flirtatiously. "Do I have to stay here? I want to return my Christmas presents, I have a little sweater for my baby that's already too small, you know he was ten pounds when he was born. Why do I have to be here? I want my old room back. I went there and there's somebody else in my room . . ."

"Why didn't you take your meds?"

"I did. Oh, I took everything, doctor. And last night I had some wine and got stoned with my brother and his friends, a little New Year's present, and oh I have a really good party to go to tonight in the Village. I wonder if it's going to snow . . ."

"What about the baby?"

"The baby?"

"On the fire escape. What were you doing out there?"

She laughed.

"Tell me."

"It was too crowded. I wanted some air . . ."

"I can't believe it," I said. You always sent patients out knowing they wouldn't take their medications or go to their doctors, that they'd resume their most destructive habits—but Mrs. Racusi was different, she had a baby with her out there on the fire escape. I couldn't get the image out of my mind.

We began the medications again. We pushed the doses as high as she could tolerate, and still she was mumbling crazy things, trying to sneak into the elevators. Finally we gave up and began shock treatments, first a dozen, which made her better for a few weeks, then eight more when she started getting worse again. If you gave enough they were almost always supposed to work—enough shocks and you'd knock the craziness out of the brain, return the seritonin or dopamine or whatever neurotransmitter was governing sanity to its proper levels.

And it worked for her. It worked the way so much of medical treatment still works, interrupting disease but restoring something different than health. She was not crazy anymore, but not right either. There was a vacuity, an inaccessibility of mind.

The baby began visiting again, and that brightened her up; the rest of the day she might be in bed, but when the baby was there, in his silver crib by the window, she'd stand by him and smile and play. At first when the baby was wrapped up and taken back to Brooklyn she'd begin getting blank again, like an old television whose picture shrinks and shrinks to a bright dot which gradually expires; but then she started feeling better, and would take passes to walk around in the neighborhood, or would call up her girlfriends at work and meet them for lunch. She even went down to Brooklyn by subway one day to meet her new doctor.

One Monday morning, on my way to Rounds, I was surprised to see the crib out in the hall, by the water fountain; why wasn't it in her room?

"Mrs. Racusi went out on pass with her brother last night," said the nurse in report. "She was acting a little strange afterward."

Jeanne and I looked at each other.

"Strange how?"

"She doesn't want the baby to come today. She put the crib out in the hall."

"I can't believe it," I said. I seemed to be saying that a lot these days. Through the rest of Rounds I sat there miserably depressed. Here it was February, she'd been here over four months, we'd been working like mad to help her—and she had to blow it again. I knew what had happened last night with her brother; he'd gotten her stoned. That alone was enough to set her loose again. I knew what I'd see this morning. The same rambling, murderous talk, the same idiocy about signing out of the hospital and Donna Marie wanting the baby and the rest. Why bother? What stupidity to spend all that effort time and again, to be compassionate, patient, sincere—only to be brought to a standstill by the very people you were trying to help. What was the point of it all?

She was worse than I expected. The babbling was as bad as in October. We gave more medication than ever before. But the baby crib began moving further and further down the hall—past the water fountain, around the corner, to the nursing station and beyond, past the center lounge to the opposite corridor. And finally it stopped.

"Maybe we can't do anything more for her," Dr. Valtin said in conference one day. "We have to consider what our choices are."

"Like what?" I asked.

"We may have to transfer her to a state hospital. If they'll take her. Or we might have to send her home like this. And give the baby to someone else. There are some people we just can't help—we have to admit that."

I began thinking what else I could do. Perhaps it wasn't too late to apply to internal medicine programs—some of the other residents were talking about that. Or take a year off—to write, to do nothing. And the women residents were talking about having babies.

And then, with Spring, she began getting better. Not a whole lot, but enough to relieve despair, for as the craziness left the depression came back, and the long days spent in bed, but she didn't talk about signing out or getting stoned with her brother; she wanted to get back to her baby and her husband. The crib rolled back to her room. The baby came in. And the family too. Everyone talked like battlefield survivors, no one screamed; the Altanos and Racusis agreed to a plan where the baby would not come home, at least in the

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beginning. Donna Marie would keep him for the time being. No one had the energy to disagree.

Just the other day she left. We had set a deadline—the middle of the month—and when that day came she had to go whether or not she was ready. Otherwise there seemed no way to get her out.

The day she was to leave I met with her before Rounds. She was waiting by my office door when I came in, which in itself seemed a good sign—and her makeup was more or less in the right locations on her face, and she had brushed her hair, and was wearing a big, loose tent-like dress that made her look pregnant still—or again.

"I can't wait to get home," she said. She sat forward in the chair, talking about how she knew she shouldn't have another baby, about her medications and the Day Hospital in Brooklyn and the way she felt better, even though it was hard to get out of bed in the mornings; still, her head was clear. Every so often there'd be a long pause—seconds, minutes, a timeless interval in which it seemed that the entire world must be in suspension and of which there would be no memory when it was over.

"What is it?" I said. And waited. The perimeters of silence seemed elastic, infinite, a blankness in which an entire confusing history could be repeated and forgotten, a story re-created with a thousand variations, like something Bret Harte might have come up with only turned inside out, stripped down to its mean essentials, its banality; what could be the point of telling a story like that, like this?

"Nothing," she said.

"What?"

"I wasn't thinking," she said. "I was just waiting. You know, there are so many things I forget. Maybe it was the shock treatments, maybe sooner or later . . ."

"Yes?" I said when the pause had gotten too long.

"I don't know. Something." She looked me full in the face, smiling for a moment, then her gaze went to the window, outside of which the trees in the hospital courtyard were hazy with yellow-green, the beginnings of the idea of leaves. "What time is it, do you know? I wish I had my watch. I don't know where I put it. My husband's supposed to be here at nine."

–David Hellerstein

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Satin Palms, by Elizabeth Inness-Brown. *Gravity,* by Catherine Petroski. *Bedlam,* by John Domini. fiction international. $10 (paperbound set)
In the Garden of the North American Martyrs, by Tobias Wolff. Ecco. $10.95
Dubious Persuasions, by Jack Matthews. Johns Hopkins. $10.95

The Art of the Story: 1*

Shelley said that poetry "lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world, and makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar." Fiction, like poetry, also happens to make unfamiliar things seem as if they were familiar. Poetry, after all, "is a mirror which makes beautiful that which is distorted." So many of Shelley's romantic notions of poetry belong to our new ice-age of contemporary fiction; they are on display in five new collections of short stories from four young writers and one seasoned author. These books are gifts from the small presses of *Antaeus* and *fiction international,* two excellent literary publications, and from the Johns Hopkins University Press, which has already given us fine works by Guy Davenport and Stephen Dixon.

Satin Palms, by Elizabeth Inness-Brown, is a grouping of utopian visions, lustful dreams, and brutal war songs. "The Wonderful Music" is a sensual, mysterious stream-of-consciousness tale that stays with us, like a tune we cannot get out of our heads. "Big Boats," with its perpetually reincarnated outcasts, who are on a first-name basis with God, is pure joy. The author takes us into her own Illyria, resisting convention and morality with the sheer fierceness of her prose. And if we witness a man's head being severed neatly from his body or a grotesque moment when a blind man pops his glass eye out of his socket and back in again, we taste the bitter experience, taste it the way the man in the Crane poem, holding his heart in his hand eats of it—because he likes to, because it is bitter, because it is his heart.

As a stylist, however, Brown is sometimes still an advanced apprentice; the narrative entanglements of "Amour," "Costa del Sol," and "Perfect Love," are less engaging than the simpler, straightforward pieces that, in the case of *Satin Palms,* are the last nine works in the collection. Despite certain weaknesses, a story like "Release, Surrender," which lapses hopelessly into savagery and insanity on Brown's fleshy easel, does render its theme—all the stories do—that echoes throughout *Satin Palms,* the theme of parallel lives: the life of one character parallels another's; the lives of all the characters parallel our own. And if we fault "News, Weather, and Sports" for losing much of its immediacy told in the past tense, there is "Sundays and Holidays," told so perfectly in the second person.

Nonetheless, Brown begins to show her magic in "News, Weather, and Sports." Two lovers are brought together: a sleeping girl and a runner. Both question the relationship's outcome—the girl is still betrothed to a doper in a Turkish prison, and the man is unused to women. But the jogger, rescuing an old man by mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, breathes new life into his feelings; the sleeping girl leaves her diamond engagement ring near a potted plant, where there is life, growth, and light. Other rich parallels resonate within this story and in others. A mother and daughter attempt to grow closer and discover something of themselves in each other; a thirty-five year old woman suddenly sees her own life mirrored in that of her new employer, a Jesuit priest—even sly remarks take on a greater significance: "So you and Brother Philip!" In "Custodian," a one-armed nephew meets his one-armed uncle for the first time, and, in an elegant piece, "Inheritance," a man comes to care for his ill natural mother and then clean up after her when she commits suicide. Her son's emotional inheritance resembles his mother's physical act of "paring herself away in the slowest most painful way imaginable."

Brown's message, in this first collection by an author full of promise, is the message of her voice—that, as Shelley knew, "our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought."

"Take me and show me what you're doing with my life," says Philip Hartley, the main character of "Over 4000 Square Miles," the opening fiction in John Domini's impressive *Bedlam.* It is a question that is asked or implied by almost everyone in the nine stories that compose this collection. To find out what it is that is happening to them, Domini's characters must take flight, return, or escape, as Hartley does. "Escaping" into the Florida everglades, just as he had escaped from the jungles of Vietnam and became a national hero, Hartley comes face to face with an alligator who, in its comatose state, is "the horny soul of all the things he could never get free of." Seeing that the creature ignores him, Hartley manages to get back to his own world, which is ready to fall apart (his wife has been informed of her husband's infidelity). "The truth, Philip Hartley," his wife wants to know, "the truth!" This truth that Hartley has been searching for, Domini seems to tell us, can only be found within himself. Like the old man of "The Return," Domini's characters must learn to deal with the complicated mysteries of the "inner self" through "swarms of emotions."

Domini's fictive voice carries his imagination beyond the boundaries of Heaven and Hell, where the universal-philosophical issues are in constant flux. The damned souls of "Laugh Kookaberry, Laugh Kookaberry, Gay Your Life Must Be," can get used to the pain and torture as easily as Dante can pass through the Inferno unscathed, but the devils who inflict the pain never stop to realize their own internal damnation. Miplip, the grotesque demon of the tale, finds himself pleading with his lover, "Don't let go, please, please, don't let go," and the accountant-narrator of "Special Instructions, Special Instructions" learns that "the urge to apologize is strong." To have these epiphanies, to touch a fellow human being, Domini hints at what he labels

**Further short fiction reviews will appear in the September NAR.*

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"Astral Projection," a story and a theme. Compassion and understanding come from reaching out to others, from "leaving your own body, entering another body."

Grissom, the aging business man of "Thirty Spot, Fifteen Back on Either Side," the best story in the collection, hopes that he will learn something about himself from his first affair, which takes place thirty years earlier than the present action of the story. "Grissom alone, he wanted to see. Grissom as a separately defined person, as an intensely, separately defined person, something as unique and identifiable as a planet in the pale sky." But Grissom has been the guinea pig in a CIA LSD experiment; not until years later does he learn of this, and he will sue. Still, it cannot settle the debt. The reflected face that Grissom had seen will haunt him the rest of his life. "A man could work as an executive and nonetheless perceive the soul," he says. This is not an aphorism but Grissom's realization that "nothing else could have devastated him so much." The intelligence agencies were merely the oracle; Grissom is Oedipus. As television crews prepare to make Grissom into a media hero (if "he watches his language"), Grissom recalls all the post-psychedelic moments in his life: an hallucinatory cry, the good deeds done "in the return," a pleasing, air-brushed photograph of his aging face, his first heart-attack. Domini turns Grissom's encounter with the television people into a moment that is nearly hallucinatory itself. Looking at the newswoman who will interview him, Grissom sees that "just one good look at her face and he knows she had no face." Almost everything for Grissom now is the "essential combination of the homely and the psychedelic." His marriage about to break up, Grissom sees that the only alternative is to "join the human race." It is the only sensible response to the question, raised in "Encounter," "Is Pain still the only form of excitement in social encounters?"

When we look at people, even those we are close to, Domini says in the fine story, "Some Numb Commitment," we sometimes see nothing; even if we blink our eyes into focus, there may be nothing there. But every once in a while there will "turn up a miracle." It is for us to distinguish between those miraculous moments and the moments when "the cool planes of (our) faces break up." We must adopt a different perspective, one that may seem as mad as some people are believed to be mad. Domini writes: "Humans see the whole tree . . . but to see the tree from the inside . . . to circle and circle and still not see the whole tree in a human way, this requires a drastic change in point of view." If this is a story about insanity, which on one level it is, then it is a story about what takes place when the heart goes mad.

"After your point of reference goes away," we learn in the Calvinoesque tale, "Ul'Lyu, Ooo, Ooo, Ooo," in which earth is hell and heaven the waiting room for re-entry, "you're free, you can go anywhere." Perhaps this may explain why Domini's fictions occasionally go on a bit too long. But with this abandon Domini spins his stories. As Ul'Lyu's lover learns, moral principle is meaningless, but music is the way to love, even on dead worlds. Domini's vision is a hopeful one, of one who can "open his broken mouth in song." And it is with more than just a little music that Domini sings to us.

Each story in Catherine Petroski's *Gravity and Other Stories* is a gem, carefully written, with precise detail, charm, humor, and warmth. She is multivoiced, a demanding prose stylist.

We find "John Gardner at the Summergarden," a likeable bartender in a witty story about a man who can laugh at the fact that his bar has just burned to the ground. The "Wife of Khan & Khan" imagines that she is married to Genghis Khan, at other times to Kubla Khan. She learns that the days before Genghis "cannot be called back" and resolves to be "as many wives to as many Khans as Khan can be." In inevitability, the story tells us, there need not be regret.

Characters search for themselves. A young runaway finds her place among a bunch of other displaced persons in a traveling carnival show in "Austin" and learns that "there's never nothing. One thing ends, another starts up. . . ." A man who is always being mistaken for Alan Alda suddenly finds himself again at the very end of "With Alda at the Outer Banks." And in "Beautiful My Mane in the Wind," a young girl who appears to be losing herself pretending to be a horse is actually discovering herself in her vivid imagination.

"The Baby Picture," one of Petroski's finest pieces, has had passed on to it some of the genes of Eudora Welty's "Why I Live at the P.O." The parent story is masterful, a tour de force of sustained narrative ingenuity—and the offspring story belongs in the same class. Petroski's humor simply abounds in this sister's account of her Sweetbaby sibling, who is spoiled rotten, bitchy, wanton, and unable to finish anything, "babies, schools, you name it."

Several stories are exquisite works of interior monologue: a lonely spinster remembering in dreams the man she should have married, spinning her memories in and out of focus like a wild lens. In "The Principal

STEPHEN SCHULTZ

LOVE EDNA

By gently scraping the flesh on the back of the fingers with a pin, just enough to draw blood, you can make a crude tattoo. Many men who travel and lead hard lives have done it, taken the ink from a fountain pen and poured it into the red scratches to burn on their hands what is thrashing in their minds. They wipe the spilled ink from the palms of their hands on their trousers, and wait for the blood to stop. While they are doing it, most of them are thinking about a woman who has left them, or one they have had to leave, one they never want to forget.

In a few days the blood dries and the fingers heal and a name appears in roughly defined letters between the knuckles of each finger. Usually the men forget the woman for a while, sometimes for many years. They learn to talk with their hands hidden in their pockets and sway as they search for words that once came easily, but mostly they begin to travel, move on, and talk to no one.

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Parts of *to dance,*" other memories, impressions, illusions, and dreams are all danced through the mind: the pure joy of dancing is met with the inherent contractions of what the dancing should have meant. "The melancholy was a large part of it all," we learn, but, "the dance, over, was sufficient in its having been danced." In "The Deposition," a woman imagines sharing the life of a man ("a problem to the community") she has unfortunately killed in an auto accident. Having dreamt his death earlier, she loses her touch with reality. Her deposition, which has been provided for her, seems to her all wrong. "Our lies," she discovers, "are real, the real becomes the ultimate falsehood, and the truth fits in nowhere."

As the main character of "Creatures of This Place" realizes, ". . . men must be seen and recognized." So many of us are nothing more than a voice, a photograph, not as worthy as a murderous cat, "who is at least true to what's inside him." But when human beings, also creatures, are true to what's inside of them, they have the ability to learn. In "Gravity," the conflict between science and nature is viewed as a kind of domestic dispute, "plotted on quadrille pads." In this conflict, there is no victor but love, which, like the floating brides and grooms in Chagall's oil paintings, seems to defy gravity, speaking to us in "the language of the leaves and of the fall."

In the Garden of the North American Martyrs is Tobias Wolff's stunning first collection of short fiction. Through these gracefully evoked tales, Wolff touches the heart of the human condition and speaks in a voice that is sincere, original yet familiar—a voice that sounds as if it must last.

His careful, simple prose style is often deceptive. His stories' complex levels of meaning are covered by a delicate veneer. His metaphors reach deep into the imagination. In "Next Door," Wolff moves subtly in and out of the lives of his character. The sounds of domestic intranquility coming from next door lead the main character to think about other proximities, other geographies, which include the body of his invalid wife. He begins to think about those places that are not on the map, lost cities, "white trees in a land where no one has ever been." Perhaps all of these are really no further away from him than next door.

The characters on whom Wolff focuses manage to gain our sympathies, but slowly, slowly, Wolff reveals them to themselves and then to us. A pair of hunters let their wounded friend bleed and freeze as they expose their own pathetic selves to each other, lose track of themselves, and make a wrong turn on their way to the hospital. An English professor, entering the world of guilt and sorrow, is genuinely touched by a woman, hairless from chemotherapy treatments. He is moved that her life has been somehow saved by a poem (by a McKuenesque poet) that had given her the strength to survive. His experience challenges his own way of thinking, his own habit of passing judgments on other people, until he must become the one "to sit in the front of the church" and be watched by others. Wolff's characters, like the nameless narrator of "Smokers," are "those who knew that something was wrong but didn't know what it was."

The author does not moralize, though his concerns are usually moral in nature. His characters are Everymen, like Davis in the brilliant story, "Worldly Goods." Davis, victimized in a harmless automobile accident, must deal with a claims adjuster, a modern version of Knowledge, who gives Davis the kind of advice he will need to get by in the world, that is, to screw before he himself is screwed. Davis stands on moral principle, but that is not enough. A friend tells him, "Nothing is good enough for you." Davis cannot see beyond the surface issues: he will drive his life the way he resolves to drive his maimed automobile "the way it was until it fell apart." And, ironically, his car is stolen from him, the way all our worldly goods are, in time, taken from us. In "Passengers," this theme is reprised once again: if a person must change his ways, what if he "wasn't sure just what was wrong with his ways?" We may admire the heroine's ability to see through her pathetic lover in "Face to Face," but what she sees never really goes beyond the heart of pity. We know that she is coming face to face with herself, deciding, as her lover has, "always to be alone." But does she know this? It is a process, writes Wolff, that might "take forever." For characters who can never "imagine things coming together," conversely, they must see things "always falling apart." How difficultly or belatedly they will come to know (as Vernon does in "Poaching") if ever they have "been offered an olive branch and were not far from home."

So "Mend your lives." "Turn from power to love," the feeble history teacher of the title story advises us. And Wolff responds poetically: how do we do so in a world where our own hands seem to be things we are holding for someone else? To protect us is the insulating power of lies. As Wolff demonstrates in "The Liar," lies, like fictions, sometimes bring people closer to the truths—in this case, that people do have something in common with each other in their relishing of lies *and* in their loathing of lies—"a shared fear."

Many of the stories of *In the Garden of the North American Martyrs* end on an introspective note. The narratives filter down to a moment alone with a character, who may be sitting alone in a closet, smoking a joint or lying on a blanket, dreaming up at the stars or lecturing passionately but with her hearing aid turned off. There they reflect and, maybe, learn. To us, they are specks on a large photograph that, when enlarged, reveals expressions on faces that are troubling, fearful, and human.

The image of the photograph suddenly blown-up to depict a terrified face is given full development in "The Girl at the Window," one of the many excellent stories by Jack Matthews in this third collection of short stories, *Dubious Persuasions*. An old photograph, taken at a time when photography was relatively modern, seems to the story's narrator to have been waiting for him and for no one else. In the picture, he spots a girl at a window; successive enlargements exhibit more: other figures, an open coffin, a painful expression on the girl's face, the word, "No," parting from her lips. As more is developed in the photograph (and in the story), much more is hidden—for instance, the man taking the picture, "his head covered with the stiff dark cloth." The narrator wonders, "What was he like? Who was he?" and speculates that he "would have liked to see him as the girl saw him." In this story can be found those essential questions Matthews raises in so many of his other pieces, which are rich in language and theme and peopled with characters "certainly full of life." In these characters, too, we see our-

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selves; they can say to us, "You sort of remind me of how I was back then." Addressed to these figures are questions pointing to the persistent obscurities in life that "pass . . . in one direction" while we "pass in the other direction."

The author writes stories of adolescence and ritual ("The Terrible Mrs. Bird," "Elma") and stories of old age and ritual ("The Pilgrimage," "First the Legs and Last the Heart"), where aging characters meet again the initiates they had once been. Since no answers are forthcoming to the questions that are asked of them and that they ask, the characters must respond not only to the silence but also to "the mystery of this silence. All of them—Gluck, Polly Sue, Fisher, Randa, and Sibley—embrace the need to communicate. A man listens to the tapes made by his late wife when she was dying and another tries to understand the deception involved in a sensitive mother who had written the poignant poetry he had believed to be her dead son's.

Matthews' characters do survive, though, in a world colored by grey skies and clouds. The book jacket, so appropriate to the tone of the stories within, shows a photograph of six tenement windows, three each on two floors; the white shades are completely drawn on the top three windows while the lower three reflect indistinguishable blacks and whites in their panes. And it is on two levels, the physical and the spiritual, that Matthews' stories reach us. As in the lovely, "Love Song for Doris Ballinger," a man compares the physical disappearance of a woman he once knew (MISSING WOMEN SOUGHT, a headline states) with her disappearance all these years in his memory. Yet she is to be found there, mysteriously recalled, as if she were there now, *un*disappeared, dubiously recollected in his mind as unexplicably as she has vanished in the world.

For Shelley, stories were "catalogues of detached facts," "a mirror which obscures and distorts that which should be beautiful." Were he only here to read our contemporary fiction, for if he did read these works by Domini and Petroski and Tobias Wolff, he would see how they, too, like poetry, are "the very image of life expressed in its eternal truths," and how, in the works of Elizabeth Inness-Brown and Jack Matthews, fiction "enlarges the circumference of the imagination by replenishing it with thoughts of ever new delight."

—Richard Orodenker

Breaking and Entering, by Peter Makuk; *Ladies Who Knit for a Living,* by Anthony E. Stockanes; *The Four Corners of the House,* by Abraham Rothberg; *Into the Wind,* by Robert Henderson.
Illinois $4.95 ea. (paper)

In our postmodern age, it seems clear that the traditional, realistic, well-made short story form is no longer a given. Plot, character, chronological narrative, dialogue, and the other elements of traditional fiction have all been called into question, as has the ability of fiction to represent the world beyond language. This is not to say that these elements of realistic fiction have no place in the stories of the present or of the future, only that the contemporary writer can no longer make the kind of assumptions about fiction that writers made in the last century. If he is to do his work in good faith, he must recognize that every choice he makes in the act of writing is exactly that: a choice made freely from a wide range of choices, all of them open to question. In this sense, every traditional, realistic story calls into question the possibilities of a form which may or may not be exhausted, and every writer of such stories provides an answer to that question, whether that is his intention or not.

These four volumes of short fiction from the University of Illinois Press are collections of stories that make use of the traditional elements of realism, and yet the authors approach these elements in radically different ways which explore (or fail to explore) the continuing possibilities of the short story form.

The stories in Robert Henderson's *Into the Wind* are contemporary fables, told in simple language and a basic narrative style. "Told" is the key word here, because Henderson is a story *teller.* He never questions his role or his medium, and he does not develop plots or characters; he merely tells them, presents them. The protagonists of his tales always have names, ages, and personal histories, not like the people the reader knows but like those he reads about in the newspapers. These characters and their stories are always kept at a distance, because Henderson never asks the reader to help in their creation. His stories do not happen to the reader, because the reader is not asked to become involved. He is simply told what to think.

Henderson offers nothing new in form or in content, and yet, though he takes no risks, though he repeats the traditional themes of death, love, family, etc. and offers the traditional answers, the reader is not convinced. Like a newspaper report, the Henderson story is simply there on the page. It reports the facts, and the reader can accept these facts or not, but, in the end, he cannot be touched by them. Invariably, Henderson's tales are about someone else.

The individual stories of *Into the Wind* have little to offer, and the collection as a whole is totally ineffective, because the stories seem to have been written according to the same formula. Each one begins with a presentation of the character by name and age, the setting, and the time frame, followed by a brief analysis of the character's personality and his "problem," followed by the tale. Henderson seems to think that his is the only possible form for fiction, that there are no other choices available, but the result is a stultifying sameness, a literary monotone. Having read one Henderson story, one has literally read them all.

Like Henderson's fables, the stories in Abraham Rothberg's *The Four Corners of the House* repeat the well-made story form, offering the reader only what he already knows. Again, there are no surprises. These stories are so worn, the characters so transparent, and the themes so overworked that the reader need not participate in them, for he has already read them many times before. There is no need for interpretation, but, even if there were, Rothberg would not allow it. Like Henderson, he is an explainer. In the opening passages of "The Red Dress," Rothberg thoroughly explains the "point" of the story he is about to tell:

> . . . Anna realized that her desire for the red dress was a search too, for something entombed inside her that she couldn't or perhaps wouldn't see.

It is difficult to know why Rothberg feels that the reader of this very sim-

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ple tale would never be able to reach this level of understanding on his own, but, of course, once the author has explained the fiction completely, the reader is all but pushed out of the story. His interpretive work has already been done, and there is no reason for him to read on.

The assumption here is that the reader cannot be called upon to participate in the creation of the fiction, even at the most elementary level. He must be led through the work like a child. Rothberg's fictions are not only predictable; they are insulting.

Henderson and Rothberg assume that the realistic story must be transparent, like a window that simultaneously shows a familiar world and puts it into perfect order. The problem, of course, is that by refusing to give the reader a role in the process of the fiction, by making him nothing more than an observer of that which he has seen many times before, Henderson and Rothberg deny even the possibility of an active reading. Like popular music which does not call upon the listener to listen, like television shows which are simply there on the screen and do not have to be watched, these stories do not have to be read.

Anthony Stockanes and Peter Makuck, on the other hand, invite the reader to co-create their stories, and, in the process, these authors also question and extend the possibilities of the traditional story form. In the title story of Stockanes' collection, and in many other pieces, the narrative moves in and out of the protagonists' minds and back and forth through time with deceptive ease, and these movements are triggered by verbal association, by the very language of the stories, by words themselves. Stockanes uses language in a highly conscientious and conscious manner, building thick textures when he needs them, reducing his lines to spare, direct statements when this is the best choice. The strong stories in *Ladies Who Knit for a Living* challenge the reader by asking him to enter into the mind of a character whose world, like ours, is a world of language—past, present, and future tense.

Like Stockanes, Makuck is not an innovator but a writerly realist, a realist who is conscious of his traditional tools—language and storiness—and of his responsibility to abdicate part of the creative role to the reader who also uses language and story to understand his world and himself. Stockanes explores the self as language, while Makuck, like the artist Roy Lichtenstein, explores culture as a sign system, as cliché. In stories like "How It Fee-yuls," Makuck challenges the reader to recognize that the language which seems to explain his life is mere babble which cannot touch his experiences or thoughts. Makuck's clichés, however, are not the cultural clichés which Henderson and Rothberg accept as explanations of experience; they are rather the clichés of the counter-culture (" 'Be cool, okay? Let's not hassle each other. It's open, right? Do our own thing . . . Respect each other's thing, right? What else can I say?' "). Makuck's characters speak only in clichés, that is to say they do not speak at all, and, as such, their experiences remain hopelessly and painfully private. "Field of Force" is one of the best Vietnam War stories written to date, perhaps because it is set not in Vietnam but here in the States where the effects of that war have never been resolved except in cliché. And "Paper Options," the finest story in the collection, is strong precisely because it recognizes (and calls upon the reader to recognize) that the possibilities of speech, literature, and storiness are only "paper options" unless both writer and reader (speaker and listener) continually question their roles as users of language.

Though the fictions of Henderson and Rothberg could be used to argue that the traditional form of the well-made story is exhausted, that its possibilities are hopelessly limited, that realistic fiction is doomed to repetition, Stockanes and Makuck show that this is not so. Postmodernism offers the fiction writer and the fiction reader new possibilities and a new awareness of their shared roles in the literary process. As Stockanes and Makuck know, to write meaningful fiction today, and to read it, is to accept that new freedom and its responsibilities. —*Welch D. Everman*

"Good God! Here I Am Again!"

Thackeray's step-grandchild, Virginia Woolf, pointed out that writers since the advent of photography and copious memoir-making and letter collecting "live in the flesh and not only in the word—are known by their hats, not merely their poems." She did not deliberately prepare for such inquest, but she did not fear it either, and now, forty years after her death, with the publication of her complete diaries and letters, we can say with absolute certainty that if "Anon was a woman," that woman is not Mrs. Woolf. What she looked like we well know: her face is famous as a flag, though her nephew-biographer says no still photograph did justice to her perpetual motion. The one attempt to have a sculpture "failed" after a few sittings; she could not bear the exacting scrutiny of Tomlin's eye. She could never be easy about (nor persuaded of) the power of her beauty. She was always uneasy about her looks and hated buying clothes and rigging-out for formal occasions. "We aint popular—we sit in corners and look like mutes who are longing for a funeral." And as a teen when she was taken to dance class (her teacher Miss Wadsworth had a glass eye and wore black satin) she and her sister hid in the lavatory to escape public scrutiny. By age sixteen she was "for knowing all that there was to be known and for writing a book."

For knowing all that there was to be known: certainly she crammed and stuffed every pocket of her being with impressions and facts and fancies; on the shelf of her works are a lifetime of gleanings, opinions, insights, malices, jokes, terrors, joys, contempts, griefs, friendships, rivalries, antagonisms. In the four decades since her death the contents of every one of those pockets have been turned out for us to assay and autopsy; we have every sort of artifact. Perhaps in a collection somewhere there is even that death-anchor she wore in her sweater pocket on the last stroll into the river. We have it all, from her first babblings (she did not learn to speak till she was three) right up to the final apologies. We are overwhelmed with material; every year brings its inundation of biography. And yet she is still elusive. "I see myself as a fish in a stream: deflected; held in place; but cannot describe the stream," she wrote near

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the end. But at the beginning, even then she was distinctly herself. The earliest extant document, a letter in her own hand to her godfather, James Russell Lowell (she would always recall the chime of the twisted silver bracelets he presented to her mother) is comprised of thirty-nine words, four thoughts, and no punctuation. Thus at age six she was already combining a certain flexibility about rules with a stream-of-consciousness approach.

Later she would say, "Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; but a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end." Her beginning was at No. 22 Hyde Park Gate, in London, on 25 January 1882, where she was born Adeline Virginia Stephen. She inherited beauty from her mother and the scholar's temper from her father, who taught her the value of rereading. From both sides she had ready and amazing examples in character. Her paternal grandfather once smoked a cigar, liked it tremendously, threw it away and never smoked another. Virginia was to write, "If I get a letter that pleases me intensely, I never read it again." Her maternal grandfather was known as the greatest liar in India. (After suffering his mort of drink, he was shipped home preserved in a cask of spirits which exploded and ejected his corpse before his widow's eyes, deranging her; the explosion is said to have set fire to the ship—family historians vary and differ—and burned it to the water, leaving the widow stranded in Hooghly.)

Virginia Woolf's nephew reports that from the first she was "incalculable, eccentric, and prone to accidents." At thirteen she suffered her first breakdown, after the loss of her mother. "Her death was the greatest disaster that could happen." Their large and prospering household collapsed under the burden of crape. Later she would revolt against every empty convention and ritual, but at fifteen she was still very much a child of the Victorians and could not even bring herself to write the word "stays" (corset) in her diary. Her father, bereaved, growing deaf, took to groaning childishly in public and private, and muttering to himself under his breath in increasing irritability as his deafness deepened: "Why won't my whiskers grow? Why won't my whiskers grow?" as he

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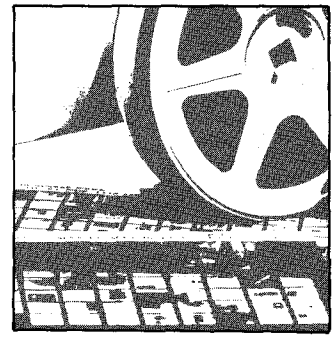

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trudged upstairs to bed, or "Oh, what a bore you are!" at the tea table when a guest had stayed overlong. When her father was dying, Henry James attended. Virginia's father, who had sought out and fostered literary careers, hardly suspected her own talents. After his death, another breakdown: voices that she believed came from overeating (she was always slender, sometimes gaunt); she would starve them out. When that took too long, she threw herself from her window. In her delirium, she heard the birds singing in Greek, and she believed the King was hiding outside in the azaleas, cursing. She lay six months in pandemonium. Recovering, she published her first reviews (1904).

In the next year that miraculous conjunction of stars and luminaries which we now call Old Bloomsbury began, a bright revolutionary band dug in somewhere between the fort of good society and the camp of bad company. Virginia undertook a series of lectures (continuing for three years) at Morley College in London. One of her early talks on English Literature began, "The poet Keats died when he was 25; and he wrote all his work before that." She had quickening wits and perhaps an even quicker temper; she was willing to settle an argument with her brother with an exchange of flung butterballs, and was, according to her nephew, "gifted in the arts of reproach."

Those were good years, green, growing years in the peace before World War I, when with her library card for a lever and bus fare for fulcrum, she began to move literature out of the Victorian morass and onto higher ground. And then a fatal trip to Greece, traveling with her sister, her brother, friends: tragedy again: brother Thoby sickened with typhoid which the doctors lost precious time in treating as malaria, correcting their diagnosis only in time to enter it on his death certificate. A very important event, an impossible loss: he became Jacob Flanders; he was Percival in *The Waves*. Her mind flickered, as it did with every heartbreak: "I could not write, & all the devils came out—hairy black ones. To be 29 & unmarried & to be a failure. . ." Then the mind burned bright again, and the flame steadied. She married Leonard Woolf.

She had a dog who put out guests' matches with its paw and disgraced itself in the company of aristocrats. Life was interesting. "Never does the pale light of dawn filter through the blinds but I open my eyes and exclaim, 'Good God! Here I am again!'—not always with pleasure, often with pain; sometimes with a spasm of acute disgust—but always, always with interest." She began to consider how to move writing beyond the "formal railway line of the sentence." Her reviewing continued. She never suffered fools gladly; for example: "Mr. George is one of those writers for whom we could wish, in all kindness of heart, some slight accident to the fingers of the right hand, some twinge or ache warning him that it is time to stop . . . [He] altogether uses up more paper than this country can well afford." Meanwhile she worked out her novels; scattered throughout the reviews written at the same time, we can find bits of her theories: "We want to be rid of realism, to penetrate without its help into the regions beneath it." Her first experiments in publishing her own books were not successful; she and Leonard stacked the unsold copies into furniture shapes and covered them with throws. But she persisted. Each new novel broke fresh ground; she began to build an audience; she began to be known around the world. Finally she had a best-seller in the United States; she was able to buy appliances and a car. She was not content to consolidate her gains, but must move forward each time into new lands: "There is only one way to remain young: it is to cease doing what you have learnt to do easily and perhaps successfully, and to attempt what you are not certain of being able to do at all."

She made brilliant new friends. She kept her old friends. She became a lion. Then Katherine Mansfield, almost a friend (time ran out), and the only writer of whose talent she had ever been jealous, died. "At that one feels—what? A shock of relief?—a rival the less?" Other friends began to fall, and nations.

Another war. "And then the passion of my life, that is the city of London—to see London all blasted, that too raked my heart." She turned fifty-nine. "I detest the hardness of old age—I feel it. I rasp. I'm tart." She began her memoirs. "And what has remained interesting?" The answer she made, the answer she had always made, was moments of being. Freud, nearing his end, a refugee, came to visit and presented her with a narcissus. She found Charlie Chaplin boring. She knew material discomfort and uncertainty. The London studio was rubble. In the country there was "No butter. No jam. Old couples hoarding marmalade and grape nuts. . ." The war dragged on. "I will go down with my colors flying." She and Leonard decided on suicide if there was an invasion, but she wanted to live, to write, to finish her book. "I feel in my fingers the weight of every word." And the daily walks, the bombs on Itford Hill, two unexploded, marked with white wooden crosses: "I don't want to die yet." She and Leonard walked along the marsh and stared at a bomb crater while German planes droned overhead. "I take two paces nearer L., prudently deciding that two birds had better be killed with one stone."

But she wanted to live! She was still interested! In February she entertained Elizabeth Bowen. They sat on the floor mending a [blackout?] curtain and Virginia "sat back on her heels and put back her head in a patch of sun, early spring sun, and laughed." She continued the final draft of her book, and a month later, she had finished. She had ridden hard and kept her seat; she had taken all her fences. "And this curious steed, life, is genuine." She rode that steed to the bank of the river Ouse but could not outdistance those maddening voices, which had returned, which ran ahead. She dismounted forever on 28 March 1941. "The process of putting out the light—painful? Yes. Terrifying. I suppose so. Then a swoon; a drain; two or three gulps attempting consciousness—then dot dot dot."

And now we celebrate her centenary: ". . . it is inevitable; centenaries are inexorable; talk of her we must," she wrote of Christina Rosetti. "We shall read her letters; we shall study her portraits, speculate about her diseases . . . and rattle the drawers of her writing table." Elsewhere she warned us, though, "But let us not be too sanguine about knowing her well." —*Mary Hood*

Quoted are *A Room of One's Own, Moments of Being, The Common Reader, The Second Common Reader, Contemporary Writers, A Writer's Diary, Jacob's Room,* all by Virginia Woolf; *Virginia Woolf: A Biography,* by Quentin Bell; *Beginning Again,* by Leonard Woolf. All quotes are from the Harcourt Brace Harvest Books editions.

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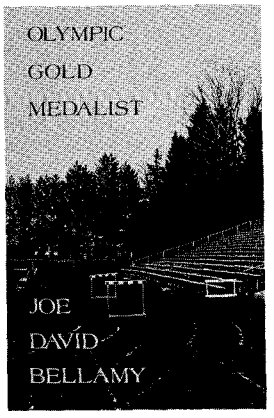

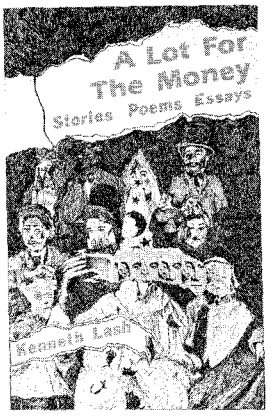

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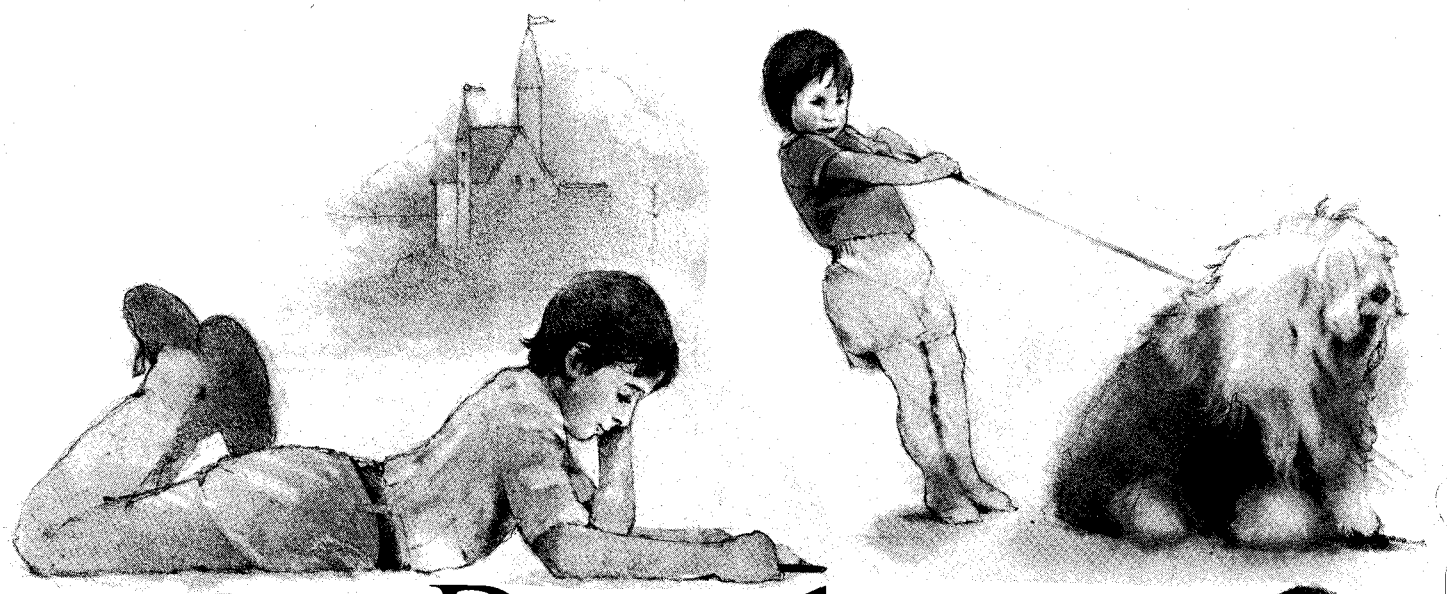

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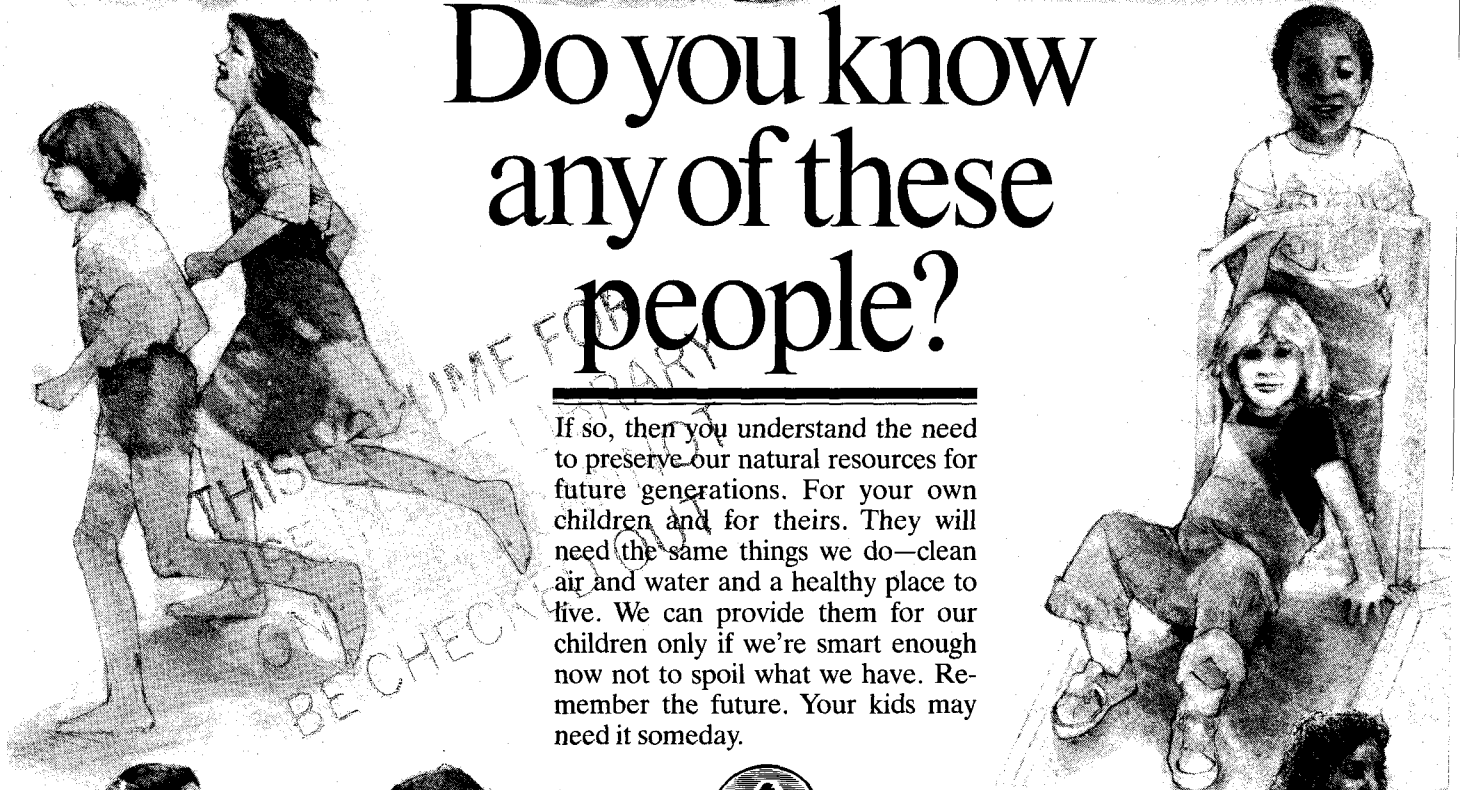
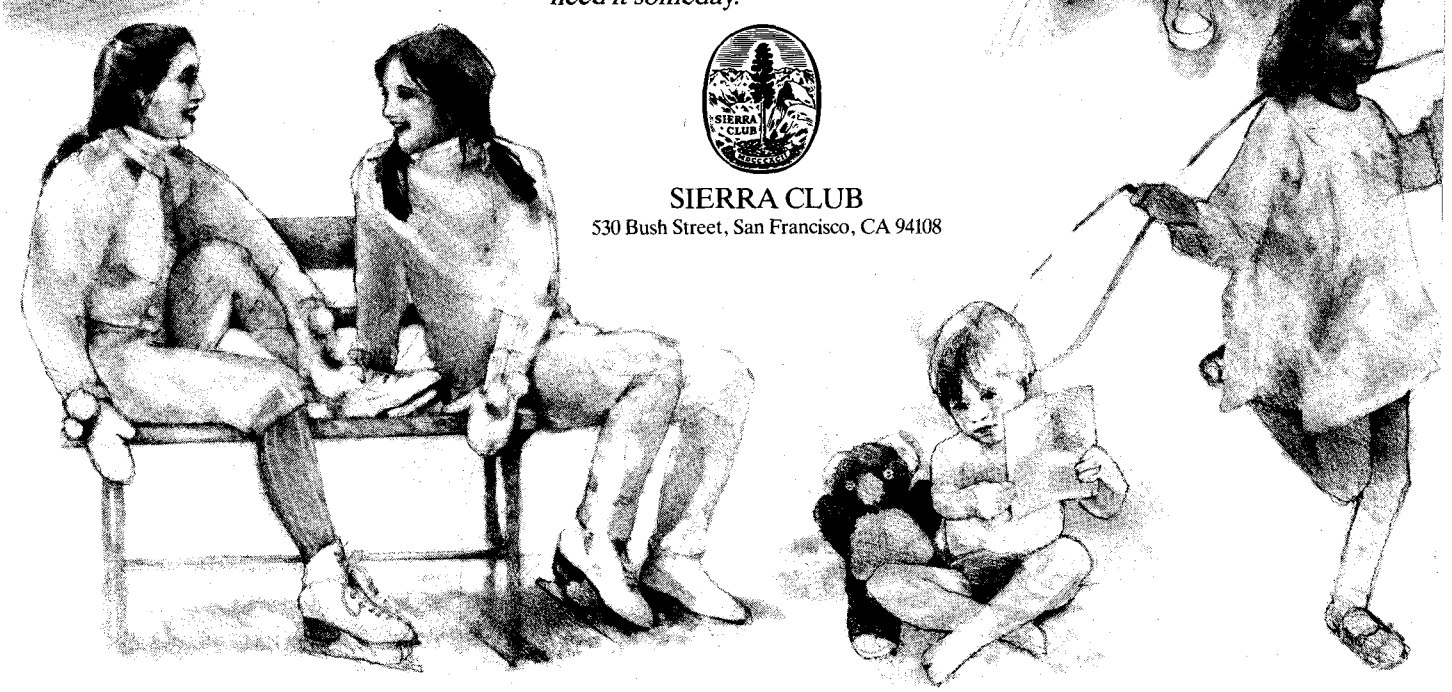


If so, then you understand the need to preserve our natural resources for future generations. For your own children and for theirs. They will need the same things we do—clean air and water and a healthy place to live. We can provide them for our children only if we're smart enough now not to spoil what we have. Remember the future. Your kids may need it someday.



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